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The Voice of a Changing Region

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MINDLESS VIOLENCE

Airstrikes, barrel bombs pound Idlib

Dozens dead, 130,000 flee new offensive by Assad regime and Russian fighter jets

Arab News Jeddah

At least 67 people have been killed and 130,000 have fled their homes as Assad regime and Russian forces pound Idlib in northwest Syria with airstrikes and barrel bombs.

The escalation in violence is the most serious in Idlib since Russia and Turkey negotiated a cease-fire in September, averting a major regime offensive on the last major opposition stronghold in Syria.

"The bombing has returned and is much heavier and has spread very widely in Jabal Al-Zawiya and rural northern Hama," said UN regional humanitarian coordinator Ahmad Al-Dbis. "The planes are not stopping at all and the bombing is continuing in a very big way."

Schools, health facilities and residential areas have been hit and Assad regime forces are employing the worst barrel bombing in at least 15 months, he said.

Hundreds of vehicles have been arriving every day in the town of Atmeh at the Turkish border, ferrying people away from the targeted areas. Mustafa Al-Haj Yousef, the civil defense director for Idlib, said more than 130,000 people had fled toward more secure areas. "Civil defense centers have been targeted directly," he said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said last week he did not rule out Assad forces backed by Russian air power launching a full-scale assault on militants in Idlib province, but it was impractical for now.



A member of the Syrian White Helmets group rescues a cat from rubble of a building damaged by the regime shelling in Hbeit, Idlib. AFP

Russia's deal with Turkey was supposed to create a demilitarized zone free of heavy weapons and militants, but Moscow says the agreement has not been implemented.

The most powerful militant group in Idlib is Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, which emerged from the Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's official Syrian affiliate. Its influence has grown as it has snuffed out rival groups. But other factions operating under the Turkey-backed National Liberation Front umbrella still have a presence.

Their spokesman, Naji Mustafa, said Damascus knew the opposition forces were well armed and capable of repelling any assault. "The regime will not be able to advance," he said.

Mustafa said regime attempts to advance into the Qalaat Al-Madiq area had been repelled, and opposition forces were shelling regime positions.

Syrian political opposition spokesman Yahya Al-Aridi told Arab News the Assad regime and Russia were using the bombardment of Idlib to cover up their failure to begin a political process that would lead to a solution to the eight-year-old conflict.

"Secondly, it is to exercise pressure on the opposition to submit to their unacceptable diktats concerning the implementation of UNSC resolutions, the Geneva communique and Resolution 2254 in particular with regard to the constitutional committee."

Al-Aridi said they also want to punish the West with the burden of refugees. "They know there are close to 4 million civilians in Idlib and they have nowhere to go but to flee to Turkey and Europe."

WAR ON TERROR

Revealed: Why the 'caliph' came back after 5 years

PREACHERS OF HATE

Suadad Al-Salhy Baghdad

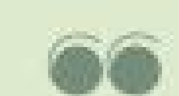
Why has Daesh leader Abu Baker Al-Baghdadi reappeared in a propaganda video after five years of relative invisibility?

In the latest part of our "Preachers of Hate" series, security analysts tell Arab News many followers of the so-called "caliphate" accused their self-styled leader of cowardice, laziness and abandoning his fighters.

"Al-Baghdadi was forced to appear at this time to respond to the charges against him by other leaders of his organization," an Iraqi national security official said.

Spotlight Page 3

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I spoke with a Saudi student who was injured in a shooting incident in North Carolina this week. He is thankfully in good spirits and recovering. My condolences to the victims' families.

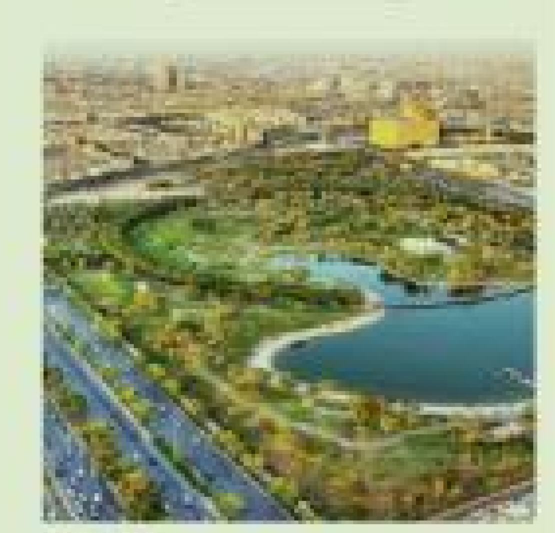
Princess Reema bint Bandar bin Sultan
Saudi ambassador to the US



Radar

KSA today





Riyadh

Grand projects

Sunday is the last day of the exhibition that introduces the capital's four most ambitious projects to the public: King Salman Park, Sports Boulevard, Green Riyadh and Riyadh Art. The event will run from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. at the King Fahd National Library.



Buraidah

Gout Festival

This festival includes cultural, social, economic and agricultural activities such as date auctions, handicrafts, art and palm-cultivation tools. The event continues until May 11 from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.



Dhahran

Zamakan

This contemporary exhibition, featuring 11 Saudi and Saudi-based artists at the King Abdul Aziz Center for World Culture (Ithra), will continue until September from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.



Makkah

Origin Festival

Each week, a different aspect of the origins of Saudi culture is showcased in this festival, which continues until May 10 from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. at Al-Ahella Trading Center.

The Register

THE PICTURES THAT MARK THE DAY



King Salman leaves Riyadh for Jeddah on Saturday. SPA

Saudi Arabia's King Salman has left Riyadh for Jeddah on Saturday, the Saudi Press Agency reported.

He flew from King Salman Air Base, where he was seen off by Riyadh Gov. Prince Faisal bin Bandar, Saudi Space Commission Chairman Prince Sultan bin Salman, and a number of princes, ministers, and senior officials.

The king was accompanied by a number of princes and officials.

Saudi Arabian moon observers said there was no sight of the Ramadan crescent on Saturday, meaning that many Muslims around the world will begin fasting on Monday.

Also on Saturday, Sheikh Abdullatif Al-Asheikh, the minister for Islamic affairs, said more than 4,000 clerics were being employed during Ramadan and 1,100 imams were being hired to lead Taraweeh prayers. He added that more than 2,400 mosques had been renovated and 221 mosques had been opened before Ramadan.

Al-Asheikh said that 100 male preachers and 50 female preachers had been assigned to Makkah and Madinah to raise awareness among those performing Umrah. He added that 70 imams have been appointed to lead prayers in 35 countries in response to requests of Islamic centers in those countries.

The Islamic world follows a lunar calendar, and the traditional moon-sighting methodology can lead to different countries declaring the start of Ramadan a day or two apart.

Fasting during Ramadan is one of the five obligatory pillars of Islam, along with the Muslim declaration of faith, daily prayer, annual charity — known as zakat — and performing Hajj.

What's Trending

Today's hot topics explained by ***Deema Al-Khudair***



PRANKS

#RamezGalal



As the holy month of Ramadan approaches, so does the scheduling of popular Arab TV shows. One program that many people are looking forward to is Ramez Galal's new series, "Ramez fe Al-Shalal" (Ramez in a Waterfall), that shows Arab celebrities being pranked on a raft.

@ramezgalal tweeted: "The official trailer for Ramez fe Al-Shalal is here on #MBCMASR." Fans cannot wait to watch it.

@rashasaied3 said: "I laughed a lot at the commercial."

@mohamedkamal666 said: "Whether it is real or fake, in both cases it is a funny and entertaining show."

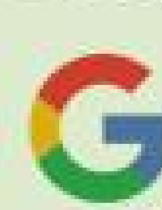
@Soma20261618 said: "Ramadan is always better with crazy Ramez."

@tarek_toqa asked: "Where do you get your crazy ideas from?"

But some criticized the show. @meim13 wrote: "It is not funny, it is nerve-racking."

HEALTH

Kelly Clarkson



American singer Kelly Clarkson hosted the Billboard Music Awards while suffering from appendicitis on Wednesday. She had surgery a few hours later.

@kelly_clarkson tweeted: "Not gonna lie … I may or may not have broken down in tears after the show from pain BUT thanks 2 all the amazing people @Cedars-Sinai I flew home directly after the event, nailed the surgery early this morning, & feeling awesome now! Bye bye appendix #TheShowMustGoOn"

According to People magazine: "Though most people don't perform a live show with appendicitis, it is an extremely common condition, affecting 1 in 1,000 Americans each year," said Dr. Travis Stork, an ER physician, host of "The Doctors."

It typically happens when a blockage of the appendix leads to an infection.

"As bacteria grows, the appendix becomes inflamed and swollen," Stork said. "Some symptoms to look out for include sharp pain on the right side of the lower abdomen and sudden pain that begins around your navel and then shifts to your lower right abdomen, that gets worse if you make sharp movements like coughing or walking. Also look out for nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, low-grade fever and abdominal bloating."

Today's Number

3m

More than 3 million people who violated residency, work and border security systems have been arrested in a year-long roundup, according to an official report. Since the campaign began in November 2017, there have been 3,075,645 offenders, including 2,396,112 for violating residency regulations, 474,086 for labor violations and 205,447 for border violations, the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) reported. Immediate penalties were imposed against 453,070 offenders and 769,786 were deported.

Who's Who



Esam Al-Nahdi

Esam Al-Nahdi is founder and CEO of Riyadh-based HalalaH, Saudi Arabia's first and leading digital banking platform.

Prior to HalalaH, Al-Nahdi founded multiple entities in the trading, retail and technology fields.

Before starting his entrepreneurial journey, he worked in the banking sector, in both credit and investment banking, including in Banque Saudi Fransi, Venture Capital Bank and Arcapita.

Al-Nahdi has a bachelor's degree in economics and finance from the UK's University of Surrey.

Recently, Al-Nahdi addressed the Financial Sector Conference held in Riyadh. Thousands of delegates took part, including ministers from the finance, economy and strategic ministries, as well as leading policymakers from capital markets and the investment and insurance industries.

During one of the sessions, he spoke about entrepreneurs and the different stages of their businesses, from starting up through to expansion. He also talked about the commitment, skills and efforts required to succeed.

The conference is part of the Financial Sector Development Program (FSDP), itself a part of Saudi Vision 2030. The FSDP is one of 12 executive programs launched by the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA) to achieve the objectives of Vision 2030.

The Region

The Middle East Roundup

Arab News Dubai

• The Jameel Arts Centre in Dubai is conducting a special screening of "Tripoli Cancelled" by Naeem Mohaiemen. The film follows a week in the life of a man trapped in an airport for a decade. It is inspired by a personal anecdote from Mohaiemen.

• Egyptian artist Youssef Ragheb's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" exhibition is still on show at the SOMA Art School and Gallery in Cairo's Zamalek district. The exhibition explores teenage culture and the rite of passage through a visual narrative. It runs until May 16.

• The Batroun Spring Festival in Beirut wraps up today. Held at the 14,000-square-meter Batroun Public Garden, the three-day festival features a wide variety of flowers and plants. There are also live performances such as magic and acrobat shows.

• The Bahrain International Exhibition and Convention Centre is still hosting the New Look Expo, a consumer shopping exhibition that will run until May 11. Shoppers can take advantage of a wide array of products featured at the event.

Prayer Times in Saudi Arabia

May 5	Fajr	Sunrise	Dhuhr	Asr	Maghreb	Isha
Makkah	4:26	5:47	12:18	3:38	6:48	8:18
Madinah	4:19	5:44	12:19	3:45	6:53	8:23
Riyadh	3:51	5:15	11:51	3:17	6:25	7:55
Abha	4:22	5:41	12:07	3:20	6:33	8:03
Dammam	3:33	4:59	11:37	3:07	6:14	7:44



Spotlight

A weekly series by Arab News, online and in print, that exposes hate-mongers from all religions who influence extremists worldwide

ABU BAKR AL-BAGHDADI

Why the 'caliph' came back

Far from a show of strength, the Daesh leader's reappearance in a propaganda video is a sign of desperation, security analysts say

Suadad Al-Salhy Baghdad

Sitting cross-legged, the overweight man with a gray-streaked beard spoke slowly and softly. Clad in quasi-military clothes, an AK-47 assault rifle by his side, he could have passed for just another aging Daesh militant, spouting the hatred that has brought parts of the Middle East to its knees over the past five years.

But this was no ordinary paramilitary. The man in the video was the one who started it all: Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Al-Badri, who calls himself Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, self-proclaimed leader of the Daesh "caliphate" and the most wanted man on earth.

Since he first made that declaration at Mosul's central mosque July 4, 2014, Al-Baghdadi has been occasionally heard but never seen. Some thought him dead, or at least wounded, and certainly in hiding. To understand why he would suddenly reappear in 18 minutes of propaganda video after five years of invisibility, it is necessary to go back to the beginning.

Al-Baghdadi was born in July 1971 in the Iraqi city of Samarra on the east bank of the Tigris, 125 km north of Baghdad. He had relatives who worked in Saddam Hussein's feared intelligence service and army, which he was unable to join because of his nearsightedness.

An average student, he enrolled at the Saddam University for Islamic Studies. In the mid-1990s he joined the Muslim Brotherhood. Contemporaries say he left the organization around the turn of the century to mix with determined militants — a path many have followed since.

Al-Baghdadi gained a master's in Islamic studies and a PhD in Islamic laws in 2000. He loved football, and lived in a small room adjacent to the mosque.

His exact involvement in the insurgency and civil war that gripped Iraq after the US invasion is disputed. He was arrested in Fallujah and held at the infamous Camp Bucca detention camp from early 2004. The ideology that fired Daesh dates back centuries, but its operational origins can be traced to this prison in the mid-2000s. It mixed militants with former Saddam military intelligence officers who together plotted the group's eventual rise. Al-Baghdadi entered the prison as a mid-level militant and left with enhanced connections and a reputation for religious knowledge.

In 2002, an organization called Tawhid wal-Jihad began to operate in northern Iraq, led by a Jordanian, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. Following the 2003 invasion, Al-Zarqawi's group grew and became part of Al-Qaeda in 2004, under the banner Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Among its recruits was Al-Baghdadi. He rose through the ranks as the US surge started in 2007 and successive leaders were killed. Judged as having sufficient religious authority, he was made leader in 2010.

In 2011, Al-Baghdadi created Jabhat Al-Nusra and said it would join the expanded Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (Daesh). The name is important — "Al-Sham"/Greater Syria evoked memories of previous caliphates. After a dispute, the Al-Qaeda leadership disowned Daesh.

Under Al-Baghdadi's leadership Daesh rapidly gained and held ground. Raqqa and Fallujah fell in early 2014, followed by Mosul. Daesh was no longer a terrorist group, but an army with occupied territory.

> **Al-Baghdadi was trying to justify the loss of his fighters in Mosul.**

On July 4, 2014, after the world had been shocked by the group's lightning military advances, Al-Baghdadi seized his moment with the address at Mosul's central mosque in which he deliberately highlighted mannerisms and stylistic elements to evoke the style of previous caliphs.

Before he spoke he used a miswak to clean his teeth in the traditional way. He wore a black turban, and spoke classical Qur'anic Arabic, claiming to be implementing God's law.

As the so-called "caliphate" established itself, Al-Baghdadi was a looming, if not visible, figure. Audio recordings were released intermittently. In the spring of 2015, he laid bare his twisted religious views, saying Islam was never a peaceful religion but was "the religion of fighting."

In September 2017, Al-Baghdadi reiterated his call for global jihad, calling for "soldiers of Islam in every location to increase blow after blow."

Nevertheless, by February 2019, Daesh had been reduced to a bleak encampment in Baghouz, Syria, where the last remaining fighters were killed or taken prisoner. Even before that, Iraqi security officials told Arab News, many Daesh fighters and commanders "had become skeptical of Al-Baghdadi, and accused him of being lazy."

However, tanks and bombs had failed to kill Al-Baghdadi himself, or his group's ideas. His new propaganda video was a wake-up call to the world's intelligence community, but it was addressed mainly to his remaining followers.

"Al-Baghdadi was forced to appear at this time to respond to the charges against him by other leaders of his organization, especially that he abandoned his fighters," an Iraqi national security official and psychological analyst told Arab News.

Another intelligence officer said: "There are real problems suffered by the organization, especially after losing Baghouz. Al-Baghdadi was trying to defend himself, and justify the loss of his fighters in Mosul and Sirte.

"He was denying the charges of cowardice and abandoning his fighters, and sought to give them new hope. These are psychological messages to raise their morale.

"The video clearly indicates the breakdown of confidence between Al-Baghdadi and his leaders."

For those monitoring Daesh's violence, it was a reminder that although the group may no longer hold territory, it is still a global threat, led by an ideologue who uses false religious justification to support its crimes.



Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's propaganda video was addressed to his followers following claims of cowardice and abandoning his fighters to their fate. AFP

BIO

Name Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Al-Badri, known as Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi

Nationality Iraqi

Place of residence Unknown

Occupation Self-proclaimed leader of Daesh

Legal status Wanted worldwide

Medium Video and audio sermons through Daesh's media arm Al-Amaq news agency

Ignore the hype, this video was an admission of abject defeat

PETER WELBY

As Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi emerged from the shadows for the first time in almost five years, terrorism analysts in the media were busy scanning his video address for any clues they could find. Articles were published on the messages that the Daesh leader might be delivering to his supporters and on hints about the state of the group's senior leadership.

What was missed in the hype — as is frequently the case — was the ideological, rather than institutional, messages in the video. Institutionally, the visual references to Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi were clear: Al-Baghdadi wants to be seen as their successor. The territory he ruled might be gone, but Daesh lives on.

However, something is not quite right with this interpretation. I don't doubt that this was the message that Al-Baghdadi intended to give, but it misses the point. The destruction of his so-called "caliphate" is more than a setback, it is the abject and utter defeat of an ideal that Al-Baghdadi embodied.

To see this clearly, we need to look back before the fall of Mosul in 2014 to the origins of the terror group's name. In 2006, shortly after the death of Al-Zarqawi, Al-Qaeda in Iraq joined with eight other Islamist insurgent groups to form the "Islamic State in Iraq" (ISI). Their insurgency might have been at its height, but that couldn't disguise a fundamental weakness: They held no territory, lived underground, their leaders were being picked off one by one, and the following year the US surge would reduce the chaos in the country to manageable levels.

The name reflected the group's fundamental ambitions. For Al-Qaeda, the restoration of the caliphate was low on a list of strategic objectives and was rarely even talked about. However, the followers of Al-Zarqawi — convinced that they were in the end of days and would re-establish the caliphate themselves — were obsessed.

To call themselves an "Islamic State" was a statement of intent.

From 2006 to 2011, this statement sounded like the product of hopeless imagination. Leader after leader was killed until Al-Baghdadi — a man who hadn't even been a jihadi until the Iraqi insurgency started, though he moved in the right circles — was elevated to the leadership in 2010.

Al-Baghdadi's rise to the leadership coincided with huge opportunities — the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the US withdrawal from Iraq the same year. Suddenly, the ambitions highlighted by the group's name became a real possibility. After some intra-jihadi organizational disagreements with Al-Qaeda in 2013, "Islamic State" could add "Syria" to its name and began to seize territory amid the chaos of Syria's civil war. One year later, Daesh crashed through the Iraq-Syria border and watched the Iraqi army melt away before them.

Four years into Al-Baghdadi's leadership of the group, he was able to declare a caliphate. God, Daesh crowed, had shown his favor. "Caliph Ibrahim" ascended the steps of the Mosul mosque and styled himself as the new leader of the global Muslim community in the image of the "rightly guided caliphs" who followed the Prophet.

The declaration of the caliphate was the climax of both Al-Baghdadi's and Daesh's existence. Anything less must be viewed as complete failure.

Analysis of his video, which rightly highlights that Al-Baghdadi is confidently presenting himself as a guerrilla leader in the model of his predecessors, needs to acknowledge that point. Al-Baghdadi's confidence as a guerrilla leader is a show, a piece of propaganda to hide the fact that he has failed. He is not the "caliph" he claimed to be.

There are clues to Al-Baghdadi's knowledge of his failure: "The battle of Baghouz has ended, and in it the barbarity and savagery of the nation of the Cross toward the Ummah of Islam was clear," he said in the video. It is a core Daesh belief that God commands them to build the caliphate. They must wonder why the caliphate they built was destroyed.

Their explanation will follow the doctrine of divine providence — the belief that God does what He wills, and it is not for us to question (a mainstream Islamic doctrine). That is fine, except it is undermined by the unspoken motive of all that Daesh and other apocalyptic groups do to force God's hand. "If we do this," the idea goes, "then God will do that."

Al-Baghdadi seeks to apply the long-standing rallying cry of Islam brought low by the perfidious West to his own defeat (despite the fact that on the ground it was primarily defeated by Muslims). This will have some effect. The threat of Daesh, which has always been underpinned by an ideology much wider than the group itself, remains severe. But let's not view his latest video as anything other than an admission of abject defeat.



Peter Welby is a consultant on religion and global affairs, specializing in the Arab world. He is based in London, and has lived in Egypt and Yemen.
Twitter: @pdowelby

News Saudi Arabia

BEST SERVICES

Security forces fully prepared for Ramadan Umrah season

Management, protection, assistance top priority

SPA Makkah

Saudi Arabia's security forces have completed their preparations for Umrah season, as part of their efforts to provide the best possible services to pilgrims during Ramadan, allowing them to perform their rituals safely and with ease.

Maj. Gen. Saeed Al-Qarni, commander of Umrah security forces, confirmed the readiness of the security services to implement Umrah plans, developed under the supervision of the director of public security and adopted by the minister of interior, that aim to ensure the safety, security and comfort of citizens, residents, visitors and pilgrims.

Maj. Gen. Mohammed Al-Ahmadi, assistant commander of Umrah security forces, said that the Public Security Department conducted training courses to improve the skills of staff and make it easier for them to manage the large crowds that gather at the Grand Mosque in Makkah during Umrah season.

He said that the security plan for the mosque has three main aspects: Organizational, for managing and controlling crowds; security, to protect pilgrims and ensure their safety; and humanitarian, focusing on assistance for the elderly and infirm, the sick, children and those who get lost.

Al-Ahmadi said that the Mataf surrounding the Kaaba can accommodate up to 107,000 people at a time: 30,000 of them in the immediate area around the Kaaba, 10,800 on the ground floor, 28,500 on the first floor, 2,000 on a floor designed for people with special needs, and 36,000 on the roof.

Maj. Gen. Khalid Al-Dabib, assistant commander of Umrah security forces for road security, said that operations began 72 hours previously to implement entry and exit procedures in Makkah. A traffic plan was developed for Umrah season, he added, by studying previous plans to identify shortcomings and enhance the benefits. One of the results is an interactive map that will provide the best routes for pilgrims to take.

Maj. Gen. Fahd Al-Osaimi, director of Makkah Police, said that his officers stand ready to maintain order, fight crime, investigate any criminal allegations and provide assistance to anyone who needs it.

IN NUMBERS

5.97m
Umrah pilgrims arrived this year.

487k
Pilgrims are still in the Kingdom, with 340k in Makkah and 147k in Madinah.



Majid Al-Qassabi, the minister of commerce and investment, speaks at the Cities Talk in Riyadh. SPA

VISION 2030

Foreign city planning experts share their expertise at Cities Talk event in Riyadh

SPA Riyadh

Three international experts in the field of city planning took part in a Cities Talk event in Riyadh, during which they shared the lessons they have learned from their professional experiences and discussed the Kingdom's development set out in Saudi Vision 2030 reform plan.

Saudi Minister of Commerce and Investment Majid Al-Qassabi, who is also the acting minister of municipal and rural affairs, hosted the gathering, which was organized by the ministry in collaboration with King Saud University. Abdulrahman Al-Fadhli, the minister of environment, water and agriculture, also took part.

Cities Talk is part of the activities for the Executive Master's Program in Municipal Policies and Urban Development. It aims to promote communication and interaction between city leaders, so that participants can benefit from international experiences of managing cities and municipal services, and motivate leaders to embrace innovation and empowerment.

Dr. Abdullah Al-Thabit, the supervisor of the program, expressed his appreciation for the cooperation it receives from educational institutions and service sectors working to achieve the goals of municipal transformation.

Then the three experts, from the US and Austria, talked about ways in which cities can be transformed, and the Kingdom's plans to do so.

Dr. Carl Weisbrod, a former chairman of the New York City Planning Commission and the founder of the New York City Economic Development Corp., described Saudi Vision 2030 as "one of the most ambitious visions in the world."

Dr. Tom Murphy, the former mayor of Pittsburgh and a city-management adviser said: "The Saudis have a distinctive value and must benefit from the advantages available, using technology and innovation. They must work on new infrastructure in Saudi cities using young people's ideas and creations, transforming them into emerging projects."

Eugen Antalovski, the executive director of Vienna Municipality's Urban Innovation Center, said: "Innovation, creativity, thinking, talent support and partnership between the public and private sector is crucial."

FAST FACT

Cities Talk aims to promote communication and interaction between city leaders, so that participants can benefit from international experiences of managing cities and municipal services, and motivate leaders to embrace innovation and empowerment.

Road to 2030

The Financial Sector Conference

BASIL M.K. AL-GHALAYINI

Last week I was honored to moderate a panel titled "Optimizing the Kingdom's Capital Market Potential through Infrastructure Development & Product Diversification," at Saudi Arabia's inaugural Financial Sector Conference (FSC) organized by the Ministry of Finance, the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority and the Capital Market Authority.

I wanted to take this opportunity to share with you my experience, shed some light on how such conferences and events impact our financial sector and economy as a whole, and finally express how proud I am to have taken part in such a pioneering financial forum.

Aimed at becoming the pre-eminent financial sector event in the region, I truly believe that this conference, which is part of the Financial Sector Development Program (and part of the Saudi Vision 2030), will succeed in increasing our financial sector's contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) by helping to build a diversified and stable financial sector. It will also aid developing a sophisticated financial market, through enabling different sectors within the financial services industry to meet and communicate under one roof, exchange experiences and discuss challenges and best practices.

The FSC hosted over 4,000 participants from 80 countries, with 21 main sessions. An additional 179 bilateral meetings were held, with 22 agreements signed. The Ministry of Finance, meanwhile, took the opportunity to announce 2019's first quarter (Q1) results, which showed a surplus of $7.42 billion, demonstrating the feasibility of the economic reforms undertaken by Saudi Arabia in light of Vision 2030.

Revenues achieved a new growth rate during Q1, at about 48 percent, and expenditure levels increased 8 percent compared with the same period in 2018. Many finance elites have expressed their confidence in our economy and the "great opportunities" our country still has to offer.

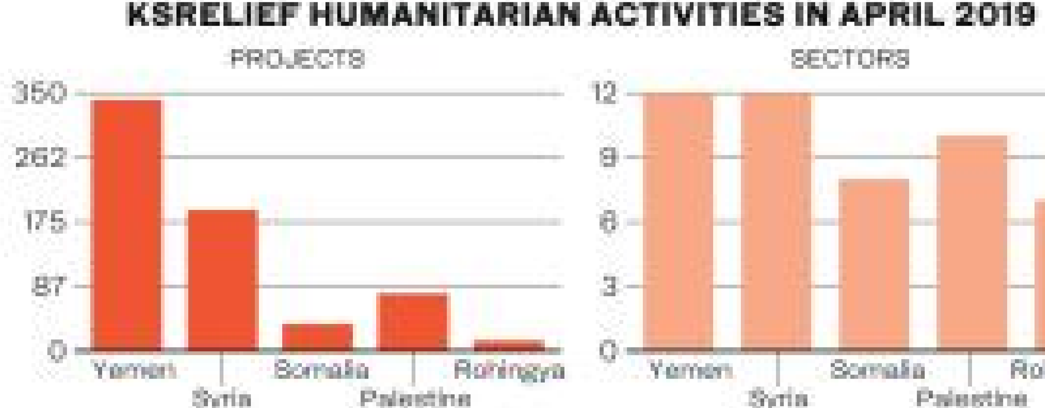
Creating a platform for financial industry leaders to meet is incredibly powerful. I should know — we at BMG Financial Group have been organizing financial forums for the past 15 years, "BMG Summer Retreat," to serve as a platform for Saudi and international experts to interact, share experiences, and tackle the investment opportunities available in the Kingdom. Since ours take place in London in association with the London Stock Exchange, we have been using the forum as a platform to promote the giga projects, which were introduced by the Saudi Public Investment Fund, to international financiers and investors.

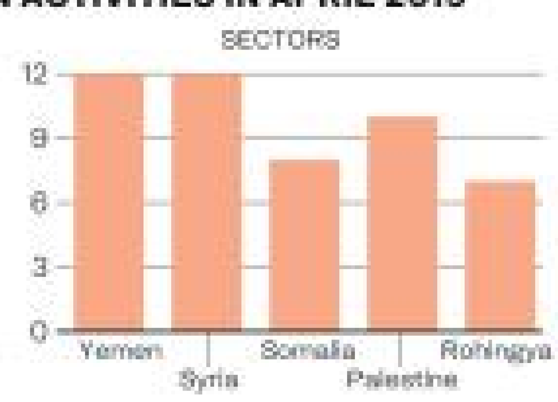
I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the organizers of the FSC on their outstanding preparations and efforts to launch such a world-class event. Moving forward, I believe that the conference will become the largest financial platform in the Middle East, through its role in supporting innovation, forging partnerships and building relationships between financial institutions and investors.

Basil M.K. Al-Ghalayini is the Chairman and CEO of BMG Financial Group.

The Day's FIGURES

KSRELIEF HUMANITARIAN ACTIVITIES IN APRIL 2019





Source : KSRelief

Briefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

Ethics & laws

OIC body works with media to promote tolerance, respect

A global network of Arab and African journalists will work with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to promote tolerance, peace and mutual respect following an agreement to establish training and educational programs at two regional centers.

The Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), founded by the OIC 40 years ago, signed a memorandum of understanding with the network to develop media practices within the framework of the profession's ethics and laws.

Cultural visits, training courses and seminars, and joint research and reports will be carried out as part of the agreement.

Training and educational programs for journalists will take place though ISESCO's two regional centers for media training in Dakar and Khartoum.

Under the agreement, ISESCO and the network will work to reduce the promotion of stereotypical photos about Arab and African peoples in international media, enrich shared cultural assets and common humanitarian values.

The agreement aims to promote freedom to practice responsible journalism and constantly train media professionals. **SPA Riyadh**

Initiative

'Pioneers of Technology' program launched

The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT) launched an online portal for registration in its "Pioneers of Technology" program on Saturday. The program aims to promote the Kingdom's status as a major pioneering digital center, through raising the economic contributions of small- and medium-sized enterprises.

Ahmed Hamdan Al-Thenayan, deputy minister for technology and digital capacities at MCIT, said that the program was a strategic initiative that would eliminate obstacles and challenges facing target sectors through using evolving technologies, such as artificial intelligence and the "Internet of things."

He noted that the program would also promote the importance of the fourth industrial revolution in business development and prosperity, and that it would support entrepreneurs in the technological field with the required tools to implement their projects.

Firms in target sectors such as e-commerce, Hajj and Umrah, agriculture, industry, recreation, sports and social entrepreneurship can apply to the program by uploading their projects or ideas on the dedicated website. **SPA Riyadh**

Heritage

Ministry to preserve cultural value of Al-Muftaha village

The Ministry of Culture is taking over from the principality of Asir' responsibility for the operation, preservation and development of Al-Muftaha village.

"The ministry will work on developing Al-Muftaha village and revitalizing it with constant events and activities that satisfy the citizens and meet their aspirations," said ministry spokesman Abdulkareem Al-Hameed.

"The work will be done in cooperation with all concerned people in the cultural sector in the area."

He added that the ministry will work with the principality to preserve the important cultural value of the village, and with official organizations such as the Development Authority of Asir region and the Public Investment Fund. The joint framework will include assessments of accessibility and infrastructure, and of previous difficulties and obstacles that have affected the village.

Al-Muftaha dates back hundreds of years and is one of the most significant tourist attractions in the Kingdom.

The Ministry of Culture plans to develop the village and its attractions as part of a comprehensive project to develop the Saudi cultural sector, as set out in Vision 2030. **SPA Riyadh**


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News Saudi Arabia

TREASURE TROVE

Read all about it: 13 centuries of Islamic heritage under one roof

Grand Mosque library contains more than 350,000 rare books and manuscripts



Tariq Al-Thaqafi Makkah

The library of the Grand Mosque is one of the oldest in the Islamic world. It is a prominent landmark in the city, the birthplace of the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him), and contains more than 350,000 rare books and manuscripts.

The library was established during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mahdi in 160 AH (776 CE) and is located in the neighborhood of Batha Quraish.

Dr. Abdulrahman bin Saad Al-Shehri, director of the library, told Arab News that it was about 13 centuries old, and was founded on the principle of enriching knowledge and providing sources of research and information, to spread the message of the Two Holy Mosques.

"Our goal is to create, and transfer, all kinds and forms of knowledge and develop them, enrich our 'intellectual production' in all disciplines, organize, control, document and introduce the latest technology to assist us and keep abreast of modern developments to facilitate research and access information," he said.

Al-Shehri added that the library contributed to the local community by hosting training courses for human development, knowledge and information technology awareness. The building consists of 13 floors covering an area of more than 2,000 square meters, with five reading rooms for men, one reading room for women, a meeting and training room, a center for scientific research and revival of Islamic heritage, and a department for audio and visual production.

The library also has a large collection of rare manuscripts. There are 6,842 original manuscripts, 2,634 Arab and foreign copies of manuscripts, 200,000 volumes and 8,000 rare books. In addition, it includes 40 private waqf libraries, 4,443 newspaper volumes in the old newspapers' section, as well as a section for the restoration of ancient manuscripts and decaying books.

Al-Shehri noted the existence of a "gifts and exchange section," which aims to enrich the library through the exchange of information resources with individuals and scientific institutions. There is also a supplies area by the library's main gate, to cater for those using the building and its resources but who may be short of reading and writing equipment. And on top of that, there is a special section for the digital reproduction of rare manuscripts and books, to save them from damage or loss and widen access to them by preserving them online.

The library also contains a rare copy of "Al-Mustatab" which was printed in Al-Tibaea Al-Amira printing house in Constantinople in 1239 AH, "Majmae Al-Anhur fi Sharah Multaqaa Al-Abhar," which was printed in Al-Khalifa Al-Aliya printing house in 1258 AH, and "Al-Ashbah wal Nazayir," which was printed in 1260 AH.





The library contains a rare copy of 'Al-Mustatab' which was printed in Al-Tibaea Al-Amira printing house in Constantinople in 1239 AH. Photos/ Social media

INNUMBERS

The Grand Mosque's library contains:

6,842 original manuscripts

8,000 rare classified books.

4,443 newspaper volumes.

40 private waqf libraries.

HIDDEN GEMS

Al-Baha steps up efforts to boost tourism

SPA Al-Baha

The Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH) in Al-Baha has started inspection plans for the summer vacation season, focusing on supervision of tourism facilities, and ensuring the best tourist services for residents and visitors to the region.

The Kingdom's Al-Baha region is known for its scenic beauty with wildlife areas, forests, valleys and mountains. It is a popular tourist destination in Saudi Arabia.

Zahir bin Mohamed Al-Shehri, the commission's director general in Al-Baha and secretary-general of Al-Baha Tourism Development Council, said that preparations will include field tours to inspect tourism facilities in the region, including hotels, furnished apartments, and travel and tour agencies. The inspections will monitor the availability and quality of services provided to tourists.

The inspection drive will also include license checks, and responses to complaints and feedback from tourists and customers, he said.

Recently, the Zee Ain village, Arabic for "city of springs," was included on a tentative list within the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization after King Salman approved its nomination in 2015. Legend has it that the springs were dug inadvertently in search of a cane belonging to well-known resident.

The tourism authority has since established a multimillion-dollar comprehensive restoration plan for the village to make it tourist friendly and shed light on its famous, locally made products.

NO TO NORMALIZATION

Jordanian mayor apologizes for helping Israeli tourists

Daoud Kuttab Amman

A Jordanian mayor apologized on Saturday for his interaction with a group of Israeli tourists, after his hospitality toward them triggered a protest, angry meetings, a social media backlash and a resignation.

Ibrahim Karim Karaki, who is mayor of Karak, organized a day-long tour for the visitors during the Jewish Passover holiday.

He was seen on Israeli media helping them to cross a valley that is closed to tourists. He also fed the group, which included children, and presented them with plaques of appreciation from the city.

His attentiveness angered Karak residents, who viewed it as an act of normalization.

Karaki's apology video, which was posted on the city council's Facebook page, followed social media attacks, the resignation of a council member, angry town hall meetings at the headquarters of professional unions, and a protest after Friday prayers.

The mayor can be seen in the apology video denouncing Israeli occupation, calling for the liberation of all of Palestine "from the sea to the river" and a rejection of normalization in all its forms.

The video is also full of praise for Jordan, including strong support for King Abdullah and the Hashemite custodianship of Jerusalem. It was filmed in front of a model of Al-Aqsa mosque.

Dr. Khaled Baqaen, the council member who resigned in protest at Karaki's actions, said the apology was not enough and that he would not change his mind. He even called for the mayor to be pushed out.

"The tourists were on a mistaken path," he told Arab News. "Fine, have the proper authorities help them and send them back. Why give them the public plaque to honor what they did? Those who elected him should remove him.

The plaques cost money. How did he decide on giving the plaques to the Israelis? What are the criteria that were considered before agreeing to order and give the plaques using city money? I did what I believe is correct. I took my position after the Zionist media celebrated the event. I will not withdraw my resignation even if the people of Karak accepted his apology, which they have."

The resignation and protests may have prompted the mayor to rethink what he did, but the social media onslaught would have been a little harder to stomach for a mayor who courted the youth vote.

Zaid Nabulsi, a lawyer and social media commentator, said the mayor had crossed a line. "There is no problem in helping the tourists whatever their nationality was," he told Arab News. "But the mayor went way beyond the humanitarian part and into the political sphere. Unilaterally presenting plaques in the name of the city of Karak to the tourists who had entered an area that they are not even supposed to have entered makes no sense. The mayor thinks he can whitewash what he did with a few words. People today are well aware of things and you can't simply fool them with words that he most likely doesn't even believe in."

Arab News attempted to contact Karaki but he did not return the calls.

Karak is home to one of the region's biggest Crusader castles. It is home to around 170,000 people.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Ibrahim Karim Karaki fed tourists and gave them plaques.
- Karaki's apology video followed social media attacks, the resignation of a council member, angry town hall meetings and a protest after Friday prayers.



Relatives of Palestinian Raed Abu Tair, who was killed during a protest in the Israel-Gaza border fence, mourn during his funeral at Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip on Saturday. AFP

ESCALATION

Israeli airstrikes, tank fire kill Palestinian as hostilities flare

Hamas says its top Gaza official is in Cairo for talks on efforts to maintain calm along the border

Reuters, AFP Gaza, Jerusalem

Gaza militants fired dozens of rockets into Israel on Saturday, drawing a wave of Israeli airstrikes that killed one Palestinian, as hostilities flared across the border for a second day.

The escalation began on Friday, when two Israeli soldiers were wounded by Gaza gunfire near the border.

A retaliatory Israeli airstrike killed two militants from the Hamas group that governs Gaza. Two other Palestinians protesting near the frontier were also killed by Israeli forces.

On Saturday, Israel hit Gaza with airstrikes and tank fire after Palestinian militants fired about 150 rockets toward Israeli cities and villages.

The Israeli military said its forces had carried out attacks against more than 30 targets belonging to Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (IJ) militant group.

A small armed pro-Hamas group in Gaza, The Protectors of Al-Aqsa, said one of its men was killed in an airstrike on Saturday.

The Gaza Health Ministry said six Palestinians were wounded. Residents identified two of them as militants.

The Palestinian Education Ministry said it was evacuating schools in areas under Israeli bombardment.

Across the border, rocket sirens sent Israelis running to shelters, and the Magen David Adom ambulance service said one woman was seriously wounded by shrapnel in the city of Kiryat Gat. Many of the missiles were intercepted, the military said.

The flare-up, which prompted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to convene his security council, comes days before Muslims begin the holy month of Ramadan and Israelis celebrate Independence Day.

Preventing flare-up

Although Israeli airstrikes in retaliation for rockets from Gaza are a frequent occurrence, Israel and Hamas have managed to avert all-out war for the past five years.

Egyptian mediators, who are credited with brokering a cease-fire after a Hamas rocket attack north of Tel Aviv in March, which triggered a burst of intense fighting, have been working to prevent any further escalation of hostilities between the two sides.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu met security chiefs on Saturday to discuss the situation, a source in his office said.

Hamas would "continue to respond to the crimes by the occupation and it will not allow it to shed the blood of our people," its spokesman Abdel-Latif Al-Qanoua said in a statement on Saturday.

He made no explicit claim for Hamas having fired the rockets.

One of the attacks was claimed by the Palestinian Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), which said it fired rockets at the Israeli city of Ashkelon.

The IJ said in a statement that the rocket barrages were a response to Friday's events and that Israel has been delaying the implementation of previous understandings brokered by Cairo.

Hamas said on Thursday that its Gaza chief, Yeyha Sinwar, had traveled to Cairo for talks on efforts to maintain calm along the border and alleviate hardship in the enclave.

Israel says its blockade is necessary to stop weapons reaching Hamas, with which it has fought three wars since the group seized control of Gaza in 2007.

Some 2 million Palestinians live in Gaza, whose economy has suffered years of blockade as well as recent foreign aid cuts. Unemployment stands at 52 percent, according to the World Bank, and poverty is rampant.

Israel accuses Hamas of using the protests as cover to carry out attacks and says its actions are necessary to defend the border and stop infiltrations.

Palestinians have participated in regular demonstrations and clashes along the Gaza border for more than a year, calling on Israel to ease its crippling blockade of the enclave.

At least 270 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire since the protests began in March 2018, the majority along the border. Two Israeli soldiers have been killed in that period.

A UN investigation released at the end of February found that Israel may have committed crimes against humanity in responding to the border protests, as snipers "intentionally" shot civilians including children, journalists and the disabled.

Israel rejected the report "outright" but Hamas called for Israel to be held accountable.

Two factors

Two factors may lead Israel to seek to calm the situation quickly after the latest flare-up.

Netanyahu is currently engaged in tough negotiations to form a new government following last month's election.

Also, Israel is due to host the 2019 Eurovision song contest finals in less than two weeks in Tel Aviv from May 14-18, toward which long-range rockets were launched in mid-March.

FASTFACTS

- A UN investigation released at the end of February found that Israel may have committed crimes against humanity in responding to the border protests, as snipers 'intentionally' shot civilians including children, journalists and the disabled.
- The flare-up follows the killing of two Hamas members.
- The attack comes days before Palestinians begin the holy month of Ramadan and Israelis celebrate Independence Day.
- Israel and Hamas have managed to avert all-out war for the past five years.
- Egyptian mediators have been working to prevent any further escalation of hostilities.

KURDISH ASSAULT

3 Turkish soldiers killed in mortar attack from Iraq

AFP, Reuters Istanbul, Ankara

Three Turkish soldiers died on Saturday in a mortar attack by Kurdish militants launched from Iraqi territory, the Turkish Defense Ministry said.

"Three of our brothers in arms died as martyrs after mortar fire from northern Iraq by terrorists," the ministry said, in reference to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

A fourth soldier was wounded, it said in a statement. The attack took place in a region where Turkey carried out a cross-border operation dubbed Euphrates Shield in 2016, aiming to drive Daesh militants and the People's Protection Units (YPG) from its border with Syria, the ministry said.

The army had retaliated with artillery fire but gave no further details on the whereabouts of the attack, it said.



Kurdish militants killed three Turkish soldiers on Saturday. AFP

Fighting insurgency

The attack targeted a military base in the border province of Hakkari, according to the ministry.

The Turkish Army had responded with aerial bombardments and artillery fire. The PKK, branded a terrorist group by Turkey, the US and the EU, has waged an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984. The conflict has claimed more than 40,000 lives, the ministry added.

The PKK's deployment in northern Iraq has been a constant source of tension between Baghdad and Ankara, with Turkey pressing Iraq to play a bigger role in fighting the group.

The Defense Ministry also said that another Turkish soldier had been killed on Saturday in northern Syria by the YPG, a Kurdish militia closely allied with the PKK.

Unlike the PKK, however, the YPG has the backing of Western powers in its fight against Daesh.

Turkish forces shelled YPG positions in the Tel Rifaat region earlier this year, saying this was in response to YPG fire.

Tel Rifaat is controlled by Kurdish-led forces and is located some 20 km east of Afrin, which has been under the control of Turkey and its Free Syrian Army (FSA) allies since an operation last year to drive out the YPG.

MILITANT STRIKE

Troops killed as Daesh attacks Haftar camp in Libya

Eastern commander 'determined to restore stability in the country'

Reuters, AP Benghazi

Daesh militants on Saturday killed at least nine soldiers in an attack on a training camp for the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) in the country's southwestern desert, officials said.

The militants drove their vehicles into the recently established training camp and clashed with guards near an air base seized earlier this year by the LNA, led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, in the town of Sabha, the officials said.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to media. The medical center in Sabha confirmed the death toll.

Hamed Al-Khaiyali, the head of the local municipality, told Reuters one soldier had been beheaded, the others "slaughtered" or shot.

Daesh claimed responsibility for the attack, saying at least 16 soldiers were killed or wounded.

Sabha is 650 km south of the capital, Tripoli, where Haftar's forces are currently fighting to take control of the city from militias affiliated with a weak UN-supported government.

The UN humanitarian agency said on Friday that the month-long assault on Tripoli has displaced nearly 55,000 people.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, or OCHA, said that at least 23 civilians have been killed since the LNA launched the offensive to take Tripoli on April 5.

The World Health Organization said the toll as of Thursday was 392 dead, including combatants and civilians. It said at least 1,936 were wounded. The battle for Tripoli could ignite a civil war on the scale of the 2011 uprising that toppled and killed longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi.

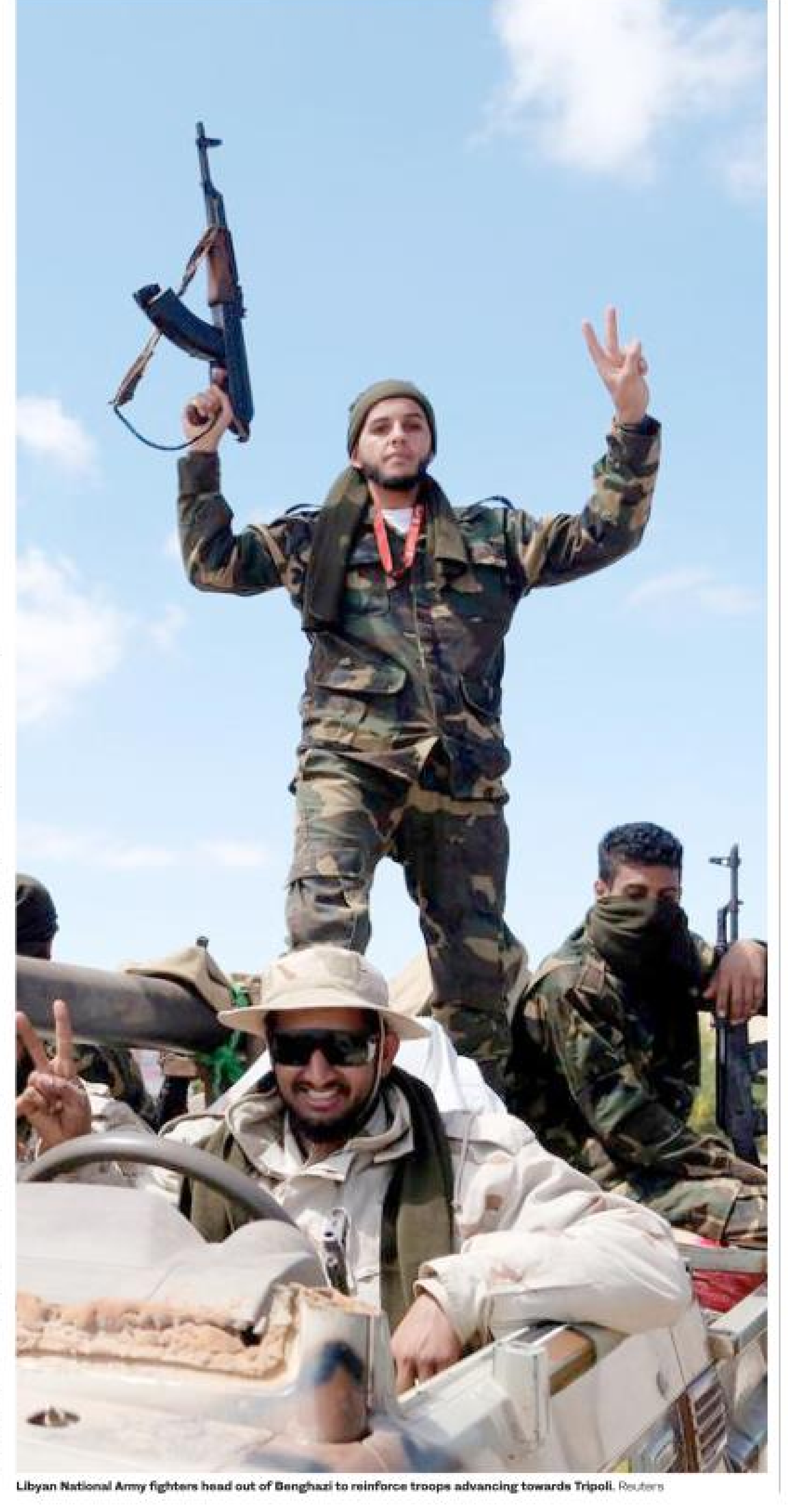
Since Qaddafi's ouster, Libya has been governed by rival authorities in the east and in Tripoli, in the west, each backed by various militias and armed groups fighting over resources and territory.

Haftar, who in recent years has been battling extremists and other militias across eastern Libya, says he is determined to restore stability to the North African country. His opponents view him as an aspiring autocrat and fear a return to one-man rule.

Daesh militants are also active in southern Libya where it has staged several hit-and-run attacks in recent months. It retreated to the south after losing its stronghold in the central city of Sirte in December 2016.

HIGHLIGHT

Daesh militants are active in southern Libya where it has staged several hit-and-run attacks in recent months. It retreated to the south after losing its stronghold in the central city of Sirte in December 2016.



Libyan National Army fighters head out of Benghazi to reinforce troops advancing towards Tripoli. Reuters

BATTLE OF NERVES

Iran to keep enriching uranium despite US curbs, says Parliament speaker

Reuters Dubai

Iran will continue with low-level uranium enrichment in line with its nuclear deal with world powers, Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani was quoted as saying on Saturday, despite a US move to stop it.

Washington acted on Friday to force Iran to stop producing low-enriched uranium and expanding its only nuclear power plant, intensifying a campaign aimed at halting Tehran's ballistic missile program and curbing its regional power.

"Under the (nuclear accord) Iran can produce heavy water, and this is not in violation of the agreement. Therefore we will carry on with enrichment activity," the semi-official news agency ISNA quoted Larijani as saying. The Fars agency carried a similar report.

Heavy water can be employed in reactors to produce plutonium, a fuel used in nuclear warheads.

The US also scrapped its sanctions waiver that had allowed Iran to evade a 300-kg limit on the amount of low-enriched uranium it can store under the nuclear deal at its main nuclear facility of Natanz.

Washington said the move was aimed at forcing Tehran to end its production of low-enriched uranium, a demand Iran has repeatedly rejected as it says it uses the uranium to help produce electricity.

Until now, Iran was allowed to ship low-enriched uranium produced at Natanz to Russia before it hit the 300-kg limit. The US also said it would no longer waive sanctions that allowed Iran to ship to Oman for storage heavy water produced at its Arak facility beyond a 300-ton limit set in the 2015 nuclear deal.

FASTFACT

Washington acted on Friday to force Iran to stop producing low-enriched uranium and expanding its only nuclear power plant, intensifying a campaign aimed at halting Tehran's ballistic missile program and curbing its regional power.

RADICAL THREAT

Factional conflicts threaten Sudan's move to civilian rule

AP Cairo

Sudanese protesters who succeeded in driving President Omar Al-Bashir from power say their revolution won't be complete until they have dismantled what many describe as a fundamentalist-dominated "deep state" that underpinned his 30-year rule.

That has already escalated tensions with the transitional military council, leading to the resignation of three members last month after the protesters refused to meet with them. A conservative political party said protesters attacked one of its meetings, wounding more than 60 members in clashes.

The conflict between the pro-democracy protesters and radicals could further stall the transition to civilian rule, already the subject of tense negotiations between the protesters and the military.

It could also draw in regional powers as Egypt and the UAE look to counter radical factions across the region, and Qatar and Turkey lend them support.

The 1989 military coup that brought Bashir to power was orchestrated by Hassan Al-Turabi, a charismatic intellectual who founded the country's modern extremist movement. Fearing a Western backlash, Al-Turabi disguised his revolution as a military coup, even having himself briefly detained in an effort to conceal his role.

Under Al-Turabi's guidance, the government imposed a harsh version of Islamic law in the 1990s that included amputations and stoning as punishment for some crimes. It conscripted self-styled mujahideen to battle rebels in Christian and animist south Sudan, and created an array of militias to impose its edicts. The government also welcomed militants from around the world, including Osama bin Laden, before expelling him in 1996 under international pressure.

Bashir and Al-Turabi later had a falling out, but even as Bashir adopted a more pragmatic stance in the 2000s, he remained committed to political Islam.

Bashir and the Islamic movement went to great lengths to create a militant deep state, by establishing multiple security forces and shadow party militias, said Rosalind Marsden, an expert on Sudan at Chatham House, a London-based think tank.

It is unclear how much support fundamentalists have outside the government. The last time Sudan held free elections, in 1986, Al-Turabi's National Islamic Front came in a distant third behind two long-established mainstream parties.

The poor showing may have been behind Al-Turabi's decision to embark on a top-down Islamic revolution three years later.

SPEEDREAD

The conflict between the pro-democracy protesters and radicals could further stall the transition to civilian rule, already the subject of tense negotiations between the protesters and the military.

Princess Beatrix of the Netherlands leaves after attending the funeral ceremony of Luxembourg's Grand Duke Jean at the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Luxembourg.



News International



Navy security and emergency response personnel including some 90 firefighters attended the scene. AFP

FAST FACT

Twenty-one adults were taken to local hospitals, but none were critically injured.

'IT WAS A MIRACLE'

Boeing plane skids into Florida river in crash-landing

All 143 on board survive as jet slams into shallow water

AFP Miami

A Boeing 737 skidded off a runway into a river after crash-landing during a lightning storm in Florida on Friday, officials said, with terrified passengers all safely evacuated to shore from the stricken jet's wings.

The plane carrying 143 people including crew from Guantanamo Bay in Cuba slammed into shallow water next to a naval air station in Jacksonville after a hard landing that saw the plane bounce and swerve down the runway, passengers said.

No fatalities or critical injuries were reported.

"As we went down ... the plane bounced and screeched and bounced more and lifted to the right and then it lifted to the left," Cheryl Bormann, a defense attorney who was on board the flight, told CNN." And then it sort of swerved and then it came to a complete crash stop."

Some oxygen masks deployed and overhead lockers flew open during the landing, she added. Twenty-one adults were taken to local hospitals, but none were critically injured, Jacksonville sheriff's office said on Twitter. Others were treated for minor injuries at the scene.

Capt. Michael Connor, commanding officer at Naval Air Station Jacksonville, told a news conference early on Saturday it was a "miracle" no more serious injuries or fatalities had occurred.

"We could be talking about a different story this evening, so I think there's a lot to say about, you know, the professionalism of the folks that helped the passengers off the airplane ... it very well could be worse," he said. All the passengers and aircrew on board had been accounted for, NAS Jacksonville said in a statement.

HIGHLIGHT

Some oxygen masks deployed and overhead lockers flew open during the landing. There were fears for a number of pet animals traveling in the plane's luggage compartment.

However, there were fears for a number of pet animals traveling in the plane's luggage compartment.

The pets had "not been retrieved yet due to safety issues with the aircraft," NAS Jacksonville said in an update on Facebook Saturday.

Images showed the Miami Air International plane lying partially submerged in water after the crash-landing, with its nose cone missing.

Passengers in life vests were instructed to clamber onto the wings of the jet before being transported to shore aboard inflatable life rafts, Bormann said. "We couldn't tell where we were, a river or an ocean. There was rain coming down. There was lightning and thunder. We stood on that wing for a significant period of time," she said.

Navy security and emergency response personnel including some 90 firefighters attended the scene.

Jacksonville mayor Lenny Curry tweeted that the White House had called to offer assistance as the situation was developing.

"All alive and accounted for. Our Fire and Rescue teams are family to all," said Curry. Teams were working to control jet fuel spilling into the St. Johns River, he added.

FRESH TENSION

N. Korea launches 'projectiles' in defiance of stalled nuclear talks

Jeff Sung Seoul

North Korea fired projectiles on Saturday morning, in apparent defiance of stalled denuclearization negotiations with the US.

According to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the "projectiles" were fired from the North's east coast, and flew 70-200 km before crashing into the eastern waters off the Korean Peninsula.

This is Pyongyang's first such launch in 17 months, and comes on the heels of the collapse of the North Korea-US Summit in Vietnam in late February.

"North Korea fired multiple projectiles from Wonsan into the eastern sea between 9.06 a.m. and 9.27 a.m.," JCS spokesman Col. Kim Joon-rak told reporters.

"Our military has been intensifying surveillance and defense readiness, and we're closely watching North Korea's movements in close coordination with the US."

Earlier in the day, the JCS described the projectiles as "short-range missiles," but later retracted the term without clarifying what they were.

The type of projectile is sensitive since North Korea is banned from test-launching ballistic missiles under UN resolutions.

Some pundits suspect that the projectiles are from the North's 300-mm multiple-rocket launchers, which are believed to feature guided, long-range capability.

"The projectiles appear to be guided rockets from multiple-launch systems," said Lee Choon-geun, a senior researcher at the state-funded Science and Technology Policy Institute.

The 300-mm multiple-rocket launcher was first shown in a military parade in Pyongyang in 2015.

In 2016, the North's state media revealed data and pictures of the weapons system for the first time.

"Some of the projectiles could be from multiple-rocket launchers, and others seem to be not," said Shin Jong-woo, a weapons analyst at the Korea Defense and Security Forum.

"When the North fired scores of short-range projectiles in 2014, some of the projectiles were confirmed to be short-range missiles."

Fears are growing that the latest military provocation by the North could undermine efforts by the South and the US to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

ANGRY NATURE

Cyclone Fani kills 15, moves to Bangladesh

AP Dhaka

A mammoth preparation exercise that included the evacuation of more than 1 million people appears to have spared India a devastating death toll from one of the biggest storms in decades, though the full extent of the damage was yet to be known, officials said Saturday.

Cyclone Fani packed sustained wind speeds of 250 km per hour when it made landfall in eastern Odisha state on Friday, equivalent in strength to a Category 4 hurricane, said Mohammad Heidarzadei, an expert on cyclones at Brunel University of London.

As of late on Saturday, India's National Disaster Response Force director S.N. Pradhan said three people had been killed, though the storm smashed thatched-roof huts, uprooted trees and power lines, ripped the roof off a medical college and sprayed the emptied coastline with debris.

Fani crossed over India's West Bengal state and moved northeast toward Bangladesh on Saturday, weakening from a severe cyclonic storm to a cyclonic storm.

At least a dozen people had been confirmed killed in Bangladesh as the cyclone hovered over the country's southwestern coast.

Briefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

Royal touch

Thailand king crowned in day of pomp, splendor

To the boom of cannons, pipes and chants, King Maha Vajiralongkorn was crowned on Saturday in a ceremony governed by centuries-old rituals, vowing a righteous reign and calling for "national security" and "happiness" in a remarkable display of royal power.

Starting at the auspicious time of 10:09 a.m. (0309 GMT), the public was granted a rare window into the cloistered halls of Thai royalty as the three-day coronation began. King Vajiralongkorn is the tenth monarch of the Chakri dynasty, which has reigned over the kingdom since 1782. He ascended the throne over two years ago following the death of his beloved father. AFP

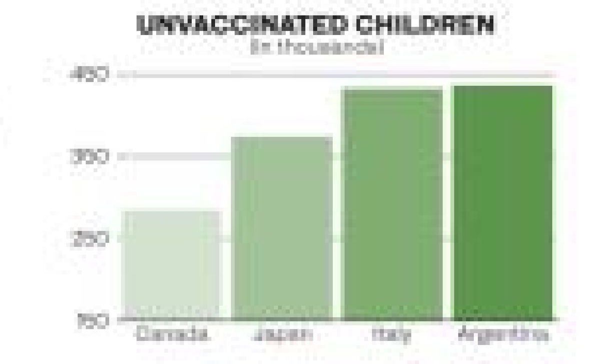
Buddies forever

'Russian Hoax' discussed in long Putin-Trump call

President Donald Trump and Russia's Vladimir Putin discussed what Trump again dismissed as the "Russian Hoax" in their first known phone call since the release of special counsel Robert Mueller's report on Russia's extensive meddling during the 2016 election campaign. Putin chuckled about Mueller's conclusions, Trump said.

During their one-hour conversation on Friday, they also discussed a possible three-party arms control pact with China, North Korea's nuclear weapons program, Ukraine and the crisis in Venezuela, where Moscow is propping up the current government over the US-backed opposition. AP

The Day's FIGURES



Source: Spectator Index

What We Are Reading Today

FROM AROUND THE WEB & IN PRINT

Patient Capital

VICTORIA IVASHINA AND JOSH LERNER

There has never been a greater need for long-term investments to tackle the world's most difficult problems, such as climate change and decaying infrastructure. And it is increasingly unlikely that the public sector will be willing or able to fill this gap. If these critical needs are to be met, the major pools of long-term, patient capital—including pensions, sovereign wealth funds, university endowments, and wealthy individuals and families—will have to play a large role. In this accessible and authoritative account of long-term capital investment, two leading experts on the subject, Harvard Business School professors Victoria Ivashina and Josh Lerner, highlight the significant hurdles facing long-term investors and propose concrete ways to overcome these difficulties, says a review on the Princeton University Press Review. Presenting the best evidence in an engaging way by using memorable stories and examples, Patient Capital describes how large investors increasingly want and need long-run investments that have the potential to deliver greater returns than those in the public markets.

Sri Lankan crisis

Maithripala vows to bring stability before election

Sri Lanka President Maithripala Sirisena said the security forces would "eradicate terrorism" and restore stability before a presidential election due for year-end, vowing to bring to heel all militants linked to the Easter Sunday suicide attacks.

"Elections cannot be postponed, therefore before the elections I will bring about stability and I will eradicate terrorism," Sirisena said in an interview.

"We have already identified all active members of the group and it's a case of now arresting them."

The president said there were a further 25 to 30 "active members" linked to the bombings still at large and that he believed Daesh was behind the April 21 attacks. Sirisena said that intelligence services from eight countries were helping Sri Lanka with the investigation. Reuters

Uncontrolled insurgency

Taliban storm checkpoints, kill 7 policemen

Taliban insurgents killed seven Afghan policemen after storming security checkpoints overnight in western Badghis province, a provincial official said Saturday.

Mohammad Naser Nazari, a provincial councilman, said three other security forces were wounded late on Friday during the attack in Qadis district.

The Taliban did not comment on the attack.

The Afghan Defense Ministry also said Saturday that 43 militants from Daesh, including foreign fighters, were killed in two separate coalition airstrikes during the night in coordination with Afghan forces. The statement said the airstrikes targeted Daesh in eastern Kunar province's Chapadara district and killed several Pakistani and Uzbek nationals. AP

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أزِحْ يا حبيبي نظّارتيكَ قليلاً لأمعنَ فيكَ النظرَ فما لونُ عينيكَ؟
هل للغروبِ تميلانِ أم لاخضرارِ الشجرْ؟
لميعة عباس عمارة

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

Move your eyeglasses a little, my love. Let me look deeply at you. What is the color of your eyes? Are they closer to the color of sunset or green like trees?

Lamia Abbas Amara
(Iraqi poet)



Europe at a crossroads with its very future in peril

YOSSI MEKELBERG

For a clear sign of how apathetic, some may say disillusioned, Europeans are with the running of the EU and its institutions, we need look no further than the meager turnout in previous elections for the European Parliament. Five years ago a mere 43 percent bothered to vote. More than 60 years after the first "European Parliamentary Assembly" was appointed and 40 years since the Parliament was elected for the first time, the vast majority of the electorate still have no interest in it and don't believe their vote matters. It would be hard to find many who could actually name their MEP.

It makes one wonder whether European citizens are conscious of how powerful this legislature is, and how influential it is on their day-to-day life. As polarization and discord are taking over as a result of rising nationalism and populism across many of the member states, can anyone guarantee that May's elections will not be the last?

They feature a bizarre additional twist, which could not have been expected only a few months ago — the participation of the UK, which can only be regarded as symptomatic of Europe's shaky state of affairs. To add to the farce called Brexit, which has already been postponed twice and is now set for the end of October, the UK is hastily arranging elections for the European Parliament, for MEPs who may serve only for a few months. And to add absurdity to farce, there is no certainty that these UK elections will take place at all. There remains a remote possibility that Prime Minister Theresa May will have a Brexit withdrawal agreement approved by the UK Parliament by May 22, the day before the European elections are due to take place, and making them pointless in any case.

One of the consequences for the EU of not reaching the long-negotiated Brexit agreement has been that the bloc has had to postpone reducing the overall number of seats in its Parliament, as it planned to do once it was left with only 27 members. Though there is still a faint possibility that the UK will not hold European elections, campaigning has begun in earnest. For the next few weeks the debate over the worst debacle in British politics since the 1940s will be focused on electioneering between not only the traditional parties but also those running as either for or against Brexit.

On the anti-Brexit side the breakaway Labour group now rebranded as Change UK, which is also supported by a number of former Conservative MPs and MEPs, is testing its electoral appeal for the first time. On the pro-Brexit side there is the lamentable return of Nigel Farage, Britain's master opportunist and manipulator of the EU issue, with his newly formed Brexit Party, which is expected to win most seats. With the more traditional parties demonstrating their indecision, not to mention incompetence, in bringing the Brexit saga to an end, voters might opt for those who offer clearer options.



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However, while the UK through its own Brexit folly has attracted much attention, the crisis of legitimacy for the European project as a whole is coming under increasing scrutiny. Somewhat counter-intuitively, anti-Europeans are competing in this year's elections, and may win more than a third of seats, up from 23 percent in 2014. This could be disruptive to the orderly functioning of the EU legislature, which has significant powers when it comes to legislation, setting budgets, membership and associate membership issues, scrutinizing the executive, and appeals to the European Court of Justice. It may be that ultra-nationalist politicians such as Marine Le Pen in France, Viktor Orban in Hungary and Matteo Salvini in Italy are not talking about dismantling the EU altogether, but are campaigning for a "Europe of sovereign nations," a body that concentrates more on economics while distancing themselves from the federal project, which envisages a common foreign and security policy and a joint vision on human rights.

Discord between those who have an internationalist view of Europe, and those trying to drag it back to its past as a continent divided along national and nationalist lines, is real and runs deep. There is an opportunity for the progressive forces to present a European vision that conveys a clear message of commonality, of what brings the citizens of this union together, and to emphasize the EU's crucial role in ensuring peace, security, stability and democratic values not only for them, but for the rest of the world. But they must also address legitimate concerns of an inflated and at times inefficient Brussels bureaucracy, and people's fears for their identity in the face of freedom of movement, which is a pillar of this union.

When the votes have been cast and counted we may have a clearer picture of the direction Europe is taking; will it be more nationalism and populism, or more integration and a union that works together to face the challenges of the 21st century? For some time now the balance has been tilting toward the former. Nevertheless, those who believe in a united, democratic and liberal Europe should make it clear to the voters on their doorstep that voting for the Exiters may well bring down the curtain on one of the most daring and successful socio-economic-political endeavors history has ever witnessed. And that is likely to ensure a return to the dark days that Europe endured during the last century, those days of division, destruction and despair that for the past 70 years it has tried to put behind it. Let these not be the last European elections.

> **As polarization and discord are taking over across many of the member states, can anyone guarantee that May's European elections will not be the last?**



COURTESY: AMJAD RASMI/ASHARQ AL-AWSAT

> **A key part of the solution is promoting longer-term political outlooks and sensible, cross-party discussion**

Broken Britain needs a return to proper politics

ANDREW HAMMOND

The UK's ruling Conservative Party lost more than 1,300 seats in Thursday's local authority elections in England. The government now also faces difficult European Parliament elections on May 23 that could be the trigger for a party leadership contest in the second half of 2019, bringing Theresa May's premiership to an end.

Nearly three years after May entered Downing Street, even many allies now concede she is in the endgame of a premiership that has been defined by Brexit. With the failure so far to deliver a UK withdrawal deal, many voters on Thursday punished not only her party, but also the official opposition Labour Party, with voters often swinging against whichever of these two was previously strongest in given geographies.

In this sense, the vote turned on its head the results of the 2017 general election to elect MPs to the Westminster Parliament. Then, both main parties won over 80 percent of all votes, their biggest combined share since 1970.

Thursday's clear winners, with a distinctive anti-Brexit stance, were the Liberal Democrats, who had their best night in local elections for a generation, picking up more than 700 seats. The Liberals, the third-largest UK party in the postwar era, may now be recovering following their slump in the polls after going into coalition with the Conservatives in Westminster from 2010 to 2015.

However, non-Brexit issues were also a factor in Thursday's elections, from micro-issues such as local planning controversies to bigger national policies. When she became prime minister in July 2016, May inherited many long-standing, contentious policy decisions ranging from pensions reform and the country's housing crisis to multibillion-pound infrastructure and transport issues.

To be sure, May has moved forward with a small part of this agenda. However, many key decisions have stalled as the government's political energy is consumed almost entirely by Brexit.

Only last week, the government admitted it was postponing the "Queen's Speech" outlining legislative priorities for the next parliamentary session. This decision was taken because of the political weakness of the prime minister, who wants to focus her remaining time and capital in office on trying to drive an EU withdrawal deal through Parliament.

With no obvious path to achieving this objective, May must decide soon how best to try to move forward before the May 23 European Parliament elections. It is a huge political embarrassment to her that the UK is taking part in this election at all, three years after the 2016 Brexit referendum, and the Conservatives will again perform badly.

With her own withdrawal deal almost certainly dead, there appear to be two main immediate options — continuing the current cross-party talks with Labour, or a further round of indicative votes, albeit perhaps this time on a preferential "knock-out" basis to try to forge a parliamentary compromise. Neither of these, however, is appealing for her as she could well be forced to compromise on one of her previous "red lines" — the United Kingdom remaining in a customs union with the EU, which would further antagonize much of her Conservative base before the May 23 election.

Andrew Hammond is an Associate at LSE IDEAS at the London School of Economics.

With EU exit issues still dominating government business, it is not just problematic for the Conservatives, but also the country at large, that so many key non-Brexit decisions have been kicked into the political long grass during May's premiership. With voters' trust in politics already at a historic low, and stagnant standards of living for many, this has the potential to further undermine confidence in the democratic process.

Especially after the Brexit vote, which underlined widespread disillusionment with UK elites, elected politicians must now show themselves capable of building consensus to overcome key long-term policy challenges. Examples include pensions and housing, and also building public confidence in major issues flagged in the referendum, including immigration.

The danger, if not, is that the rise of populist parties such as the hard-right, anti-Islam UK Independence Party will pick up steam again with the often half-baked, damaging agendas they champion. May herself has highlighted this risk in what she has called the "potential failure of center-ground politics" unless it tackles tough issues, and responds to public concerns to prevent what she called "fringe politics."

Meeting these tough-to-solve, first order challenges is a significant hurdle that democratic institutions and politicians must do better at surmounting. For if too many first order policy problems fester without resolution, it can even give the perception of a broken process, and that democracy itself has failed.

A key part of the solution is promoting longer-term political outlooks and sensible, cross-party discussion rather than the increasing tendency toward short-termism. There is also a pressing need for wider democratic renewal.

Contrary to what some populist politicians assert, there is no "silver bullet" agenda that can address these challenges overnight. Instead, a long-term, concerted effort is needed to better address these issues through a range of educational, home affairs, economic and other policies.

Collectively, such an agenda can move toward demonstrating more effectively how fair and inclusive democratic politics can overcome or ameliorate the challenges that many people are experiencing in a world changing fast in the face of globalization. Failure to do so, and better demonstrate the positive impact that mainstream politics can make, may lead only to growing support for fringe politics with its often ill-considered, ineffective policy platforms.

Opinion

Iranian minister's magic act flops

ABDULRAHMAN AL-RASHED

The Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was in New York on the pretext of attending UN meetings, but used the opportunity to visit US media, intellectual and research institutions in an attempt to induce elites there to agree with his country's stance.

The truth is that Zarif needed this visit to fix his broken image inside Iran itself. He wanted to prove that he is a "shrewd dealer" who can make the West buy anything — as he did with the EU and the Obama administration. But this time, faced with strong Republican figures, he cannot succeed without making genuine concessions.

From his numerous dialogues, I have chosen to discuss his speech at the Asia Society in New York and his YouTube interview. In a lengthy speech, Zarif claimed there was a conspiracy against Tehran by leaders he referred to as the B Team — Mohammed bin Salman, Mohammed bin Zayed, Benjamin Netanyahu and John Bolton, President Donald Trump's national security adviser. He claimed they were plotting something against his country before the US presidential election (maybe so that Trump would win). Zarif thinks that by spreading suspicion, he can divide the pro-Trump bloc.

There is no doubt that Trump's policy is in the interests of the US and of the region, because Washington's goal is to force Iran to stop creating conflict and supporting terrorism, and to become a law-abiding state.

Like a magician, Zarif wants to divert people's attention to other matters. The real issue is Iran's plan to dominate Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, the Arabian Gulf and Yemen. The commander of the Quds Force runs the battles in Damascus and Beirut, and tens of thousands of fighters were sent there by Iran. Regional countries and the international community, are worried about this terrible invasion.

Paradoxically, the nuclear agreement played an enabling role by lifting the trade embargo and ignoring the military expansion in the region, in addition to rewarding the regime with more than $100 billion.

Zarif quoted the response of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo when asked if the US plotted against Iran. Pompeo had said: "Even if we did, would I be telling you guys about it?"

The Iranian foreign minister insisted that Pompeo's response indicated that there was a conspiracy, as he said before, that the B Team was plotting against Iran. He did not discuss the reasons that brought the situation to this dangerous stage, whether there was a conspiracy, a plot, or only a blockade. If his regime accepted only two conditions — the cancellation of the military enrichment project and the aggressive policy — the crisis would have ended.

Zarif knows his limitations in Tehran. He cannot and does not have any influence on strategic decisions within the Iranian regime. He is an employee who has been marginalized to the point that he was not included in meetings of senior leaders, such as receiving the Syrian president. His response was to resign through his Twitter account — when Twitter is banned in Iran except for the regime's leaders — so that his resignation took on an international dimension, and the regime was forced to retreat.

There is more to the story.

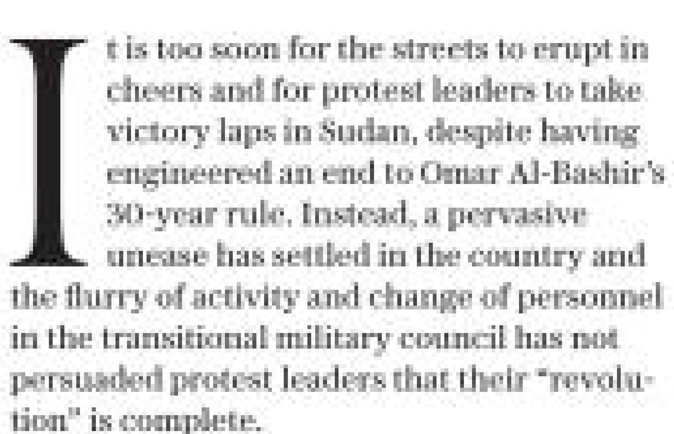
Abdulrahman Al-Rashed is a veteran columnist. He is the former general manager of Al Arabiya news channel, and former editor in chief of Asharq Al-Awsat.
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What Sudan needs now is a period of cool reflection

HAFED AL-GHWELL





It is too soon for the streets to erupt in cheers and for protest leaders to take victory laps in Sudan, despite having engineered an end to Omar Al-Bashir's 30-year rule. Instead, a pervasive unease has settled in the country and the flurry of activity and change of personnel in the transitional military council has not persuaded protest leaders that their "revolution" is complete.

A day after Bashir was forced to step down by the four heads of his state security apparatus, his successor, Awad Ibn Auf, announced his resignation following intense protests demanding a civilian transitional council. It is likely that Sudan's military elite were trying to replicate systems in which civilian control of government is in all but name. This was evident when the military council initially proposed handing over control of government to civilians except for the Interior Ministry (state security) and Defense Ministry (military control). This time, however, the Sudanese categorically rejected these maneuvers by persisting in sit-ins near army headquarters.

The justification is simple. If it worked the first time, it will work again — and it has. In fact, protest leaders went as far as threatening to establish their own transitional council if the military failed to acquiesce to civilian demands.

In response, many Bashir loyalists and senior officials who were part of the former regime have either been sacked or voluntarily resigned, in deference to protesters' demands. As a result, there is a lot of confidence among the Forces for the Declaration of Freedom and Change (FDFC), an opposition coalition led by the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), going into negotiations with the military council.

The head of the military council, Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman Burhan, is determined to merge protest demands with the military's mandate during this transitional phase. He refers to the council as "complementary to the revolution" and appeared to make a commitment to shifting power into civilian hands. The protesters alleged that the military council was not serious about a speedy transition of power to civilians and decided the only remedy for this deadlock was to intensify protests, which have so far remained an acceptable expression of Sudanese will.

Unfortunately, the path forward for Sudan is likely to be a rocky one. It will take a lot more than personnel changes in the military council and brinksmanship between protest leaders and army chiefs for the situation to normalize.

Just last week, three more members of the transitional military council, Lt. Gen. Al-Tayeb Babakr Ali Fadee, Lt. Gen. Jalal Al-Deen Al-Sheikh and Omar Zain Al-Abideen, resigned because of their uncomfortably close ties to Bashir. A fourth member, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, the commander of the Rapid Support Forces, has also been targeted for removal because of the role of his paramilitary forces in the Darfur genocide. His removal has been demanded by the Sudanese Communist Party, a member of the opposition coalition.

The transitional military council has agreed to recognize the SPA-led FDFC as the only legitimate representative of the protesters, a crucial victory for an opposition wary of the council's initial plans to include the Islamist Popular Congress party, and other factions close to the deposed Bashir, in transition consultations.

The controversial leader of the Popular Congress party, Hassan Al-Turabi, had a key role in Bashir's ascent to power in 1989. He also once hosted Osama bin Laden when he was the leader of Al-Qaeda, along with his deputy and successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in Sudan.

Currently, the transitional military council and opposition groups speak of each other in terms that are full of praise but light on substance. It is likely that major announcements will be made in the coming weeks concerning the fate of the country. It would be a welcome change, because while the protests may have scored an important victory, it has come at a cost. Landlocked South Sudan's crude exports must pass through Port Sudan, but shipments have been delayed because Sudanese Oil Co. staff have joined the protests.

The FDFC vows to continue protesting until the military agrees to its demands for full civilian control of government, which does not inspire confidence that shipments will resume any time soon. South Sudan, meanwhile, will have to delay expanding its oil production capacity until after the situation improves in its northern neighbor.

It can only be hoped that protest passions will cool and that Sudan's need for a peaceful and orderly transition will be a factor in the considerations of all sides, rather than pushing matters toward chaos and violence.

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How do you solve a problem like Korea?

CORNELIA MEYER



North Korea launched a series of short-range projectiles early on Saturday into the Sea of Japan. This comes on the heels of top-level North Korean diplomacy, with two Trump-Kim summits, three inter-Korean summits, no fewer than four visits by Kim Jong Un to Beijing and a Kim-Putin summit last month. So how can we reconcile the diplomacy and rapprochement between the North and the South with North Korea's most recent provocation, which seems to bring us back to square one?

In 2017 North East Asia collectively held its breath as the rhetoric between President Donald Trump and Kim intensified and the latter launched more and more powerful test missiles. North Korea's neighborhood of Northeast China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan is among the most populated and highly industrialized areas in the world. Leaders in Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo and Taipei therefore breathed a collective sigh of relief when tensions eased ahead of the first Kim-Trump summit in Singapore in June 2018.

It was certainly an achievement by Donald Trump to bring Kim to the table. Several previous initiatives had failed. Each time, the chronology was similar. North Korea agreed to some reductions in its nuclear ambitions and initially adhered to the promise. At some points in the past, the negotiations would reach an impasse and Kim's father, Kim Jong Il, would walk away and resume nuclear activities.

It was therefore progress when the grandson of the country's founder, Kim Il Sung, came to the negotiating table. The first Trump-Kim summit went well. Alas, it was a rushed affair, and the US administration did not finalize the arrangements beforehand. The two leaders claimed victory, but could not agree what they had agreed upon. Their definitions of denuclearization varied as widely as their objectives. For Kim this was about ending sanctions, obtaining access to capital and ending the US military presence on the peninsula. For Japan, South Korea and the US it was about a total dismantling of the North's nuclear program and activities.

So it came as little surprise when the second summit failed. Trump said Kim had wanted too much, asking for the end of all sanctions in return for dismantling the Yongbyon nuclear facility — which would not constitute denuclearization according to the US definition. Kim claimed he had merely asked for the lifting of some sanctions. A classic "he said, he said" scenario. Still, the leaders parted on friendly terms.

Since then Kim has been busy. His visit to Russia was intelligent from his point of view. Russia is a near neighbor, an old ally and rich in natural resources, particularly oil. Kim's four pilgrimages to Beijing are testament to China's behind-the-scenes involvement in the rapprochement between the US and the North.

Now the rockets are flying again and everyone is at a loss. Some may not like that Russia reinserted itself into the conversation and others may look skeptically at the cards Beijing is holding. However, it makes sense to have the near neighbors involved in trying to find a solution to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, if lasting peace is the objective. South Korea, Japan, China and Russia are important players without whom it may well be impossible to find a permanent solution.

If Saturday morning proved one thing, it is that North Korea is not going to go away quietly, and that a solution is required for the sake of Northeast Asia and the world.

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MARIA AL-ZAHRANI
INVESTORS RELATIONS MANAGER, ALMARAI

'It was my mission to come back to Saudi Arabia'

Finance in the Kingdom might still be a man's world, but this pioneering head of investor relations is ready to change that

Frank Kane Riyadh
Illustration by Luis Grañena

For Maria Al-Zahrani, living and working in Saudi Arabia is not only a career opportunity, but also a "mission."

The daughter of a Saudi father and an American mother, she felt the pull of the Kingdom from an early age, and after her father's death when she was a young girl, she always felt that her future lay in the country.

"From my 8-year-old viewpoint, there was a lot of unfinished business, so it was my mission to come back to Saudi Arabia," she said.

The route took her from her native Washington state to New York — where she was a victim of the crash of Lehman Brothers in 2008 — and on to London, Libya, Dubai and, ultimately, Riyadh, where she is now head of investor relations (IR) for Almarai, the leading foods group in the Kingdom.

"My father was very patriotic and it was important to him I come back to the country and get to know my culture and my community, so that's what I did," she said in the capital during the recent Financial Sector Conference.

Al-Zahrani lays claim to the title of the only female head of IR in the country, and sits on the board of the Middle East Investor Relations Society, the professional body for executives in the fast growing subsector of the financial services industry.

She is one of a small but growing number of women in what is largely a man's world, but the momentum is with her and other women as the Kingdom seeks to transform itself, and the financial sector opens up to gender equality.

"I knew it was only a matter of time before women could be actively integrated into the workforce. Now what you see with women is the moment that everyone's been waiting for. It's a tremendously exciting time to be a woman working in the country," she said.

Al-Zahrani is a pioneer in two senses — as a woman in the male-dominated world of finance, and as a practitioner of IR, which is relatively new to the Kingdom's corporate world.

In a nutshell, IR is where marketing, communications and shareholder value meet. The profession aims to help maximize a company's share value by communicating with investors about the forces driving the financial performance — and delivering capital and dividend growth to shareholders.

As more Saudi companies join the Tadawul, and the Kingdom opens up to foreign investment, the job becomes especially important. Investors — actual and potential — are on a learning curve not only about Almarai, but also about the economic, social and cultural environment in which it exists.

Al-Zahrani said the financial establishment's view of IR is changing. "Sometimes they look at IR professionals as maybe part of government relations, as people who engage with the regulators and fill out paperwork. The IR function was seen as virtually a kind of public relations officer job, and there is a role for that. I have people on my team who deal with that kind of work," she said.

But as the role as evolved in the more sophisticated investment scene in Europe and North America, it has become more than just regulator liaison.

"There are Internal reporting and monitoring functions — looking at how our shares are trading on a daily basis, and notifying executives of any events taking place in the markets.

"Then there is the regulatory compliance aspect, which is more the PRO-type function, engaging with Tadawul and the regulator Capital Markets Authority, with whatever they need to fulfil their requirements.

"Lastly, there are the investor engagement aspects, where I am actively involved. A lot of that has to do with engaging international institutional investors. What's interesting about that part of the job is that a lot of our conversation is not just around facts and figures — a lot of what we discuss is more intangible," she said.

> **It's a tremendously exciting time to be a woman working in the country.**

Al-Zahrani often finds herself dealing with issues that go way beyond the corporate details of Almarai, or even the wider food industry in which it operates. "Investors have questions like: What it's like to be a woman in Saudi Arabia, what do I think about women driving, what do I think of the geopolitical environment, is their capital going to be at risk because of wars in neighboring countries?" she said.

"Fundamentally, they want to understand, is this a company I can respect? Can I put my money here and feel comfortable?"

Since Al-Zahrani joined Almarai in 2017, there have been occasions when investors were in need of urgent answers to these questions. Last year, a difficult economic backdrop, the introduction of value added tax, and rising costs associated with the government policy of Saudization added up to increased pressure on profits for the multibillion-riyal company. How does she explain these issues to investors without being seen to blame government policy?

"I don't necessarily make a criticism. These are exogenous factors to the company. They are not a reflection of our business, but they certainly have impacted our business," she said.

Rather than handing out blame, Al-Zahrani got down to the practical job of explaining Almarai's long-term strategy for dealing with the profit downturn — a focus on bigger "industrial" customers at home, and expansion into different areas in the Middle East, such as Egypt and ("selectively") Iraq, for future growth.

What about trickier areas, such as Qatar, previously a big trading partner but hit when the Kingdom and its allies imposed sanctions against business there?

"I just explain to shareholders that we are no longer active in that market. It was 5 percent of the top line from a revenue perspective, so we're looking at other ways to grow the business from a top line perspective," she said. These include leveraging up from straight consumer business at home — selling more to industrial caterers and restaurant chains — to the international growth strategy.

Most of all, how did she explain to international investors the circumstances surrounding the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi last year, an event that led to fears that foreign investment would stay away from the Kingdom in protest? Was her phone ringing hot?

"Not so much, but we do get questions about that, and my general response is that it is really out of the scope of my work — I'm focused on private sector activities, on business and that is more of a political dialogue that does not have much to do with my day to day job, or the company for that matter," she said.

Those kinds of critical moments aside, the IR role seems destined to assume greater prominence in Saudi Arabia. For one thing, the upgrade to MSCI emerging market status has already led to greater foreign participation in the Kingdom's domestic markets. Almarai was included in a recent list of "top picks" for foreign investors in Saudi Arabia by US investment bank Goldman Sachs, she pointed out.

Many studies have proved the strong connection between good cooperate governance — of which IR is an integral part — with financial and share price performance, and this is a theme Al-Zahrani will continue to push, along with the benefits of transparency and social responsibility.

> **Listed companies need somebody who is going to clearly articulate the message to external parties.**

One thing she feels is desperately overdue is to have a formal IR function made mandatory for all Tadawul companies in the Kingdom.

"It's tremendously important. Listed companies need somebody in their organizations who is going to clearly articulate the business model and message to external parties. I think historically there has been a bit of a hesitancy to be transparent and open, and they need that," she said.

"It's a very traditional view and a very Saudi view. They have to fight the tendency to be reserved. If you're not there telling the world what the message is, they're going to make up their own story," she added.

It is a lesson for the financial world, but also for the rest of the Kingdom, Al-Zahrani believes. "It's not just a perception management problem for the company, it's for the whole country. People make these really horrendous allegations about the country and nobody stands up and says, 'no, this is not correct.' They let the lies continue and the stories get twisted. I don't understand why they don't directly face it," she said.

BIO

BORN
- Washington state, US

EDUCATION
- PPE program, Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University, UK
- BA economics and politics, Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts, US
- MSc economic theory, London School of Economics

CAREER
- Intern, Forbes magazine
- Assistant project manager, Libyan National Economic Strategy
- Analyst, Lehman Brothers
- Associate director, Lehman Brothers NY
- Manager, export credit finance, KBR
- Emaar Economic City, head of investor relations
- Almarai, investors relations manager

Business News



Siemans Chief Executive Joe Kaeser is looking to simplify the running of the conglomerate by dividing different divisions into what he calls "a fleet of ships." Shutterstock

ENGINEERING

Siemens weighs carving out Gas and Power unit

Moves afoot to break up German giant in a bid to streamline the running of its different divisions

Reuters Munich

German industrial conglomerate Siemens is weighing up options for its Gas and Power unit, carving out all or part of the business to prepare it for a potential stock market listing or a merger with a peer.

The business caters to the oil and gas industry as well as to power generators and distributors.

The sources said Siemens' supervisory board may decide on a potential carve-out at a meeting on Tuesday and could present the plans at the company's capital markets day on Wednesday.

Siemens declined to comment on the future strategy for the Gas and Power unit, whose gas turbines business has seen orders slump as utilities shift towards renewable energy sources.

"The situation on the global market for fossil power plant technology remains unchanged. Siemens began tackling these challenges back in early 2015," a company spokesman said.

Chief Executive Joe Kaeser has embarked on a strategy to simplify Siemens' operations by separating the conglomerate into what he has termed "a fleet of ships" which thrive under their own steam.

The move is designed to enable the businesses to raise their own funds for acquisitions and investments as well as crystallising their standalone market value, removing some of the "conglomerate discount" that weighs on Siemens' valuation.

As part of this push, Siemens listed its healthcare unit Healthineers last year.

Siemens also has a separately listed renewable power business, Siemens Gamesa.

Kaeser tried to combine its train segment Siemens Mobility with listed peer Alstom, but scrapped the deal earlier this year as antitrust concerns mounted. Analysts expect that Siemens will eventually opt for a stock market listing for the Mobility unit.

Siemens has told investors that its capital markets day would focus on its Gas and Power, Smart Infrastructure and Digital Industries businesses, none of which have so far have been set up as independent companies.

Gas and Power, headquartered in Houston, Texas, makes products for oil and gas extraction, as well as gas and steam turbines and technology for power grids, including high-voltage transmission systems.

The unit was set up weeks ago as part of a reshuffle Siemens' business units.

FASTFACT

Siemens' gas and power unit is headquartered in Houston.

WEEKLY ENERGY RECAP

Assessing the impact of waivers

Faisal Mrza

Volatility heightened last week, which closed with prices at their lowest in almost a month, after hitting a six-month high a week ago.

Prices slumped after a buildup in US crude inventories by 10 million barrels, amid record high US oil production to 12.3 million bpd.

That took the edge off earlier bullish market sentiment after expectations that the upcoming Iranian oil supply shortage would be filled by other OPEC producers.

Brent crude fell to $70.86 per barrel, while WTI fell to $61.94.

Asian refiners, the largest buyers of Iranian crude, have already begun asking other producers for higher volumes for June and July loadings.

This comes in light of the expected fall in Iranian crude as the waivers of previous US sanctions expire, as reported by S&P Global Platts.

Asian refiners are seeking cargoes for June and July to substitute Iranian barrels — though it is unclear if Chinese refiners are among them or if the world's largest oil importer will continue with commercial swap arrangements as in 2012 — not a preferred option for Tehran.

The US 2019 gasoline price average is within the range of $2.70 to $2.80 per gallon, which is just 50 cents higher than at the start of the Trump presidency.

The oil market suggests there is an incompatibility between US energy policy goals for lower prices and OPEC goals for a steady supply and demand balance.

The unexpected introduction of US sanctions waivers pushed the market into a surplus last year which led to the softening of the oil price.

That was only resolved by the 1.2 million bpd production cuts agreed by the so called OPEC+ group that took effect in January, which helped tighten the market and bring it back into balance.

Still, producers remain cautious. The market does not expect OPEC to react to the expiry of waivers by increasing supplies in the same way it did last year.

OPEC producers have until June 25, when they meet next, to read the situation and assess the likely impact of ending US sanctions waivers on Iranian crude exports.

Faisal Mrza is an energy and oil marketing adviser. He was formerly with OPEC and Saudi Aramco. **Twitter: @faisalmrza**

AUTOMOTIVE

US rejects Tesla bid for tariff exemption for Autopilot

Reuters Washington

US trade officials have rejected Tesla Inc's bid for relief from President Donald Trump's 25 percent tariffs on the Chinese-made Autopilot "brain" of its Model 3 and other electric vehicles, one of more than 1,000 product denials linked to China's industrial development plans.

According to documents filed by the US Trade Representative's office (USTR) and reviewed by Reuters, exclusion requests from Tesla and others for Chinese-made products from aircraft parts to biotechnology instruments were denied because they were deemed "strategically important" to the "Made in China 2025" program.

The company has separate pending tariff exclusion requests for duties on the Chinese-made Model 3 Center Screen and Car Computer before USTR.

Tesla said in a statement on Monday: "Our costs for producing our vehicles in the US have also been affected by import duties on certain components sourced from China."

The denials illustrate a systematic approach by the Trump administration to thwart China's efforts to develop tech industries Washington alleges benefit from theft and forced transfer of US intellectual property.

Made in China 2025, a program aimed at growing China's prowess in 10 strategic industries dominated by the US, is at the heart of trade negotiations and US demands for sweeping changes to Beijing's policies.

Those industries include energy, autonomous vehicles, aerospace, semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, robotics and artificial intelligence.

Tesla first made its request to exclude its 3.0 Autopilot electronic control unit in July 2018, calling it the "brain of the vehicle," warning "increased tariffs on this particular part cause economic harm to Tesla."

In a March 15 letter, USTR general counsel Stephen Vaughn said the agency was denying Tesla's request because it "concerns a product strategically important or related to 'Made in China 2025' or other Chinese industrial programs." USTR also denied a request for the earlier 2.5 version of the Autopilot ECU.

It was not clear when the letter was posted on a US government website. Other exclusion denials were posted at the same time, including for industrial robots imported by Kawasaki Robotics USA and composite panels made by Hexcel Corp. in China for use in various Boeing Co. aircraft.

USTR has received China tariff exclusion requests for nearly 13,000 products and denied 5,311. Of the denials, 1,166, or more than a fifth, contained the same language as the Tesla request, citing links to Made in China 2025.

Tesla told USTR it was unable to find a manufacturer in the US, adding that "choosing any other supplier would have delayed the (Model 3) program by 18 months, with clean room setup, line validation, and staff training."

Tesla says it "reflashes" the Autopilot ECU with the latest Firmware created in California when it is shipped from China by supplier Quanta Shanghai.

"For a product as safety-critical to consumers, and critical to the essence of Tesla, we turned to industry experts who could achieve this quality and complexity in addition to the deadlines, which was not possible outside of China," Tesla wrote. "When it comes to identifying a supplier, we cannot risk our customers' lives due to a defect from a supplier."

Tesla says denying tariff exemtions on its Autopilot's "brain" will cause it economic harm. AP

BACKGROUND

Made in China 2025 is a program aimed at growing China's prowess in 10 strategic industries dominated by the US.

The Autopilot ECU, also used in the Model S and X, includes two printed circuit board assemblies, which Tesla calls "the brain responsible for Tesla's Autopilot functionality" and the main safety system for the vehicle. Tesla has a separate pending tariff exclusion request, filed in December, for duties on the Chinese-made Model 3 Center Screen. Other exclusion requests also cited the lack of US sources. Kawasaki said there were no industrial robots manufactured in the US, and that Tesla only produces robots in China and Japan.

In a previously unreported request, Tesla also asked USTR to waive tariffs on the 17 inch (43 cm) cockpit touchscreen control panel that displays navigation, media, audio, climate control, energy display, and all in-cabin controls.

Other US automakers have also sought similar exemptions for Chinese-made products, but thus far, none have yet received answers from USTR.

$280m

Compensation sought by ExxonMobil from Cuba's state-owned oil company over 'unlawful trafficking' of its assets.



Construction workers in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. US hiring and unemployment data showed that 263,000 jobs were created last month. Getty Images

ECONOMY

Jobs surge lifts Trump's re-election chances

Unemployment down, wages up — but the news isn't good for everyone

AP New York

The lowest unemployment rate in a half century. More than 260,000 new jobs. And higher hourly wages.

"I'll be running on the economy," President Donald Trump declared on Friday. And why wouldn't he?

The day's new round of sunny employment figures offered fresh evidence of a strong national economy — and a big political advantage for Trump just as the 2020 presidential campaign begins to intensify. Stocks are at or near record levels , too, as the president often notes.

Democrats pointed to regional disparities in the new government report. And overall income inequality hasn't narrowed.

But the Democrats who are fighting to deny the Republican president a second term are beginning to acknowledge the weight of their challenge: Since World War II, no incumbent president has ever lost reelection in a growing economy.

Even Trump's critics are forced to admit the state of the economy could help him at the ballot box.

"Relative to all the other terrible aspects of Trump's record, the economy is more of an asset to him," said Geoff Garin, a veteran pollster.

Indeed, it was a day of celebration for Trump and his allies, who have been well aware of recent warnings that the economy might slow this year.

The president's chief economic adviser, Larry Kudlow, said the US has entered "a very strong and durable prosperity cycle." He gave all the credit to his boss: "He is president of the whole economy."

By most measures, the US economy is in solid shape. It is expanding at about 3 percent pace, businesses are posting more jobs than there are jobless workers and wage growth has picked up.

All these trends are helping lift a broader swath of the population than in the first five years or so after the Great Recession.

Low-income workers are actually seeing healthy wage gains — larger than everyone else's. In March, the poorest one-quarter of workers were earning 4.4 percent more than a year earlier, according to data compiled by the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. The richest one-quarter were up 3 percent.

Lower-income workers had started to outpace their higher-paid counterparts in 2015, so it's not a Trump phenomenon. And part of the increase has occurred because of minimum wage hikes by more than 24 states.

The news isn't good for everyone. Workers in metro areas are still getting larger pay increases than those in smaller towns or rural areas, according to the Atlanta Fed's data. In fact, that gap that has widened since Trump was elected.

And overall income inequality hasn't narrowed. The richest 5 percent of Americans earned 3.4 times a median worker's pay in 2018, according to the left-leaning Economic Policy Institute. That's up from 3.3 times as much in 2016.

In Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in a region Trump carried three years ago, county archivist Barbara Bartos said the president's policies have helped a lot of people, although she has seen little economic benefit personally.

"I think he should get credit where credit is due," said Bartos, a 69-year-old registered Democrat who backed Hillary Clinton. "I think he helped a lot of people but left a lot of people out."

Three hundred miles to the west in Cleveland, another former Clinton supporter, 42-year-old IT manager Jessica Wieber, said she feels "pretty good" about her economic situation. "I think he's had a big impact," she said of Trump's effect on the economy, adding that tax breaks given to companies and corporations have allowed them to hire more workers.

FASTFACT

The African-American jobless rate in the US is 6.7 percent — more than double the figure for whites.

"I hope it helps trickle down a bit," said Wieber, a single mother with four children.

Amid the largely positive news for Trump, friends and foes alike question whether he can stay focused on the economy as the 2020 contest plays out. Blessed with similarly positive news in the past, he has veered into more controversial topics like immigration, the Russia investigation and personal attacks against his rivals.

Democrats, in fact, are counting on him to change the subject.

"The economic indicators would normally be incredibly positive for an incumbent president," said Jefrey Pollock, the pollster for Democratic Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand's presidential campaign. However, the pollster said hopefully and somewhat rudely: "He can't shut his mouth."

At this point, 18 months before election day, Trump's political standing is far weaker than the economic numbers would suggest.

The latest CNN poll found that 43 percent of Americans approve of the way he is handling his job as president. That's even as 56 percent say they approve of his handling of the economy, marking a high for the president since he took office.

He receives lower marks for other issues, including health, immigration and foreign policy.

The General Social Survey, a respected nationwide survey, has found that the share of Americans feeling satisfied with their finances has returned to pre-recession levels.

In 2018, about a third expressed satisfaction with their financial situation, up from 23 percent in 2010. About four in 10 said their finances had been improving over the previous few years, while just 15 percent felt them worsening.

In 2010, more than twice as many said their financial situations were getting worse.

Last month, the government report said, the African-American unemployment rate was 6.7 percent, up from a record-low 5.9 percent last May. That's more than double the rate for whites. And in 2017, according to the latest data, the black-white income gap widened, with the typical African-American household earning $40,258, while the equivalent white figure was $68,145.

Still, the Asian and Latino unemployment rates hit or matched record lows in April.

By some measures, the job market has been better in the past. A much smaller proportion of Americans are working than in the late 1990s, the last time unemployment was nearly this low. Part of that is because the US is aging and baby boomers are retiring.



The latest jobs data left US President Donald Trump in a buoyant mood. AFP

BizBriefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

Finance

LA mansion linked to 1MDB scandal to be sold

US prosecutors are seeking to sell a $39 million Los Angeles mansion allegedly bought by fugitive Malaysian financier Low Taek Jho with money stolen from a state fund, court filings showed.

Low, popularly known as Jho Low, has been charged in Malaysia and the US for his role in the alleged theft of $4.5 billion from state fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB).

Low, whose whereabouts are unknown, has denied wrongdoing through spokesmen.

In 2017, the US Department of Justice (DoJ) filed civil forfeiture lawsuits on several assets said to have been bought with stolen 1MDB funds, including the mansion near Hollywood's famed Sunset Strip.

The mansion was now empty and falling into disrepair, US prosecutors and the property's holding company said.

Reuters

Energy

China's natural gas use rises amid pollution fight

China's natural gas consumption grew steadily in the first quarter amid the country's fight against air pollution, the official Xinhua News Agency reported.

Apparent consumption of natural gas rose 11.6 percent during the January-March period from a year earlier to 77 billion cubic meters, following robust annual growth of 18.1 percent in 2018, Xinhua said, citing data from the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC).

China released a three-year action plan in 2018 to fight pollution, aiming to boost the share of natural gas in its total primary energy consumption to 10 percent by 2020.

According to a separate Xinhua article, China consumed 76.9 million tons of refined oil in the first quarter, up 0.4 percent from a year earlier.

Reuters

Chart of THE DAY

The pound has rallied as optimism over Brexit has increased with hopes the ruling Conservatives can strike a deal with the opposition Labour Party.

Source: Bloomberg

POUND CRUNCH TIME

Strategists see Sterling's fate dependent on the outcome of Brexit deal talks ($ per £)

Pound spot

1.36 1.34 1.32 1.30 1.28 1.26 1.24

Jun 2018 Sep Dec Mar 2019 Jun

What We're Riding

BIG WHEELS FOR BIG DEALS

Finn Cycle

Perhaps not one for the purists, the Finn Cycle by Sun Mountain Motor Sports was born from the desire to play a faster round of golf. Riding the Finn Cycle is invigorating and sporty while encouraging fast play, say its makers.



Aviation

Turkmenistan Airlines to resume flights to Europe

Turkmenistan's national air carrier has scheduled flights to the UK and Germany again following a ban imposed in February by European Aviation Authorities.

Flights to the English city of Birmingham and Germany's Frankfurt from June 1 appeared on Turkmenistan Airlines' schedule this weekend.

Flights were not listed to Paris, another destination the airline flew to regularly.

"We have no confirmation regarding Paris," a Turkmenistan Airlines spokesman said.

The resumption of flights was not mentioned on the European Aviation Safety Agency's website as of Saturday.

Hundreds of passengers were left stranded in Britain in February after the EASA suspended Turkmenistan Airlines over safety concerns.

AFP

Courts

ExxonMobil sues Cuban firm over seized assets

US giant ExxonMobil has filed a lawsuit against Cuba's state-owned oil company and a major business group for what it called "unlawful trafficking" of its assets after Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution.

The suit seeks $280 million from Cuba-Petroleo (Cupet) and Cimex, which operates service stations on the island nation.

The lawsuit from America's biggest oil producer came as the administration of US President Donald Trump lifted the suspension of Title III of the 1996 Helms-Burton Act.

The provision allows anyone whose assets were seized after the revolution to sue Cuban individuals and businesses profiting from the former holdings.

It had been suspended by all previous US presidents to avoid causing friction with allies.

AFP



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Our continued growth in the Kingdom will create many direct and indirect job opportunities in the Saudi economy.

Darren Davis
CEO of Ma'aden



An Australian government report highlights the increasing demand of Australian red meat by consumers in the Middle East.

HOSPITALITY

Hyatt plans to double footprint in KSA by 2023

Hyatt Hotels Corporation has announced that it expects the number of Hyatt hotels in Saudi Arabia to double, with five additional Hyatt branded hotels to open by 2023, adding approximately 1,300 rooms to the region. The expansion includes the opening of Grand Hyatt Al-Khobar, marking the first Grand Hyatt branded hotel in the Kingdom, set to open in late 2019.

The expected opening of Jabal Omar Hyatt Centric Makkah Hotel and Residences will mark the entry of the Hyatt Centric brand into the country. Additionally, Hyatt Regency Jeddah Serafi Mall is slated for a 2021 opening and a dual-branded Hyatt Place and Hyatt House Riyadh/King Abdullah Financial District is slated for 2022.

"The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the fastest growing religious tourism markets in the world and one of Hyatt's primary focus areas within the Middle East," said Ludwig Bouldoukian, regional vice president of development, Middle East and North Africa for Hyatt.

"Saudi Arabia continues to make significant strides in boosting tourism and infrastructure in a bid to diversify the economy. The ambitious expansion of Hyatt brands cement Hyatt's brand presence, both among Gulf residents and the increasing number of international travelers visiting Saudi Arabia."

Hyatt's current portfolio in Saudi Arabia consists of Park Hyatt Jeddah, Jabal Omar Hyatt Regency Makkah, Hyatt Regency Riyadh Olaya, Hyatt Place Riyadh Al-Sulaimania and Hyatt House Jeddah Sari Street.

"Hyatt has established a strong brand reputation in Saudi Arabia and the wider Middle East by consistently delivering premium service," said Kurt Straub, vice president of operations, Middle East, Africa and South West Asia for Hyatt. "By identifying the needs of local and international high-end travelers, we will continue this journey of excellence by offering memorable experiences, complemented by impeccable service standards."

Hyatt's growth in Saudi Arabia includes plans for the following hotel openings:

Grand Hyatt

The first-of-its-kind in Saudi Arabia, Grand Hyatt Al-Khobar, slated to open in late 2019, will be situated within Al-Rashid Mall in the Eastern Province.

Hyatt Regency

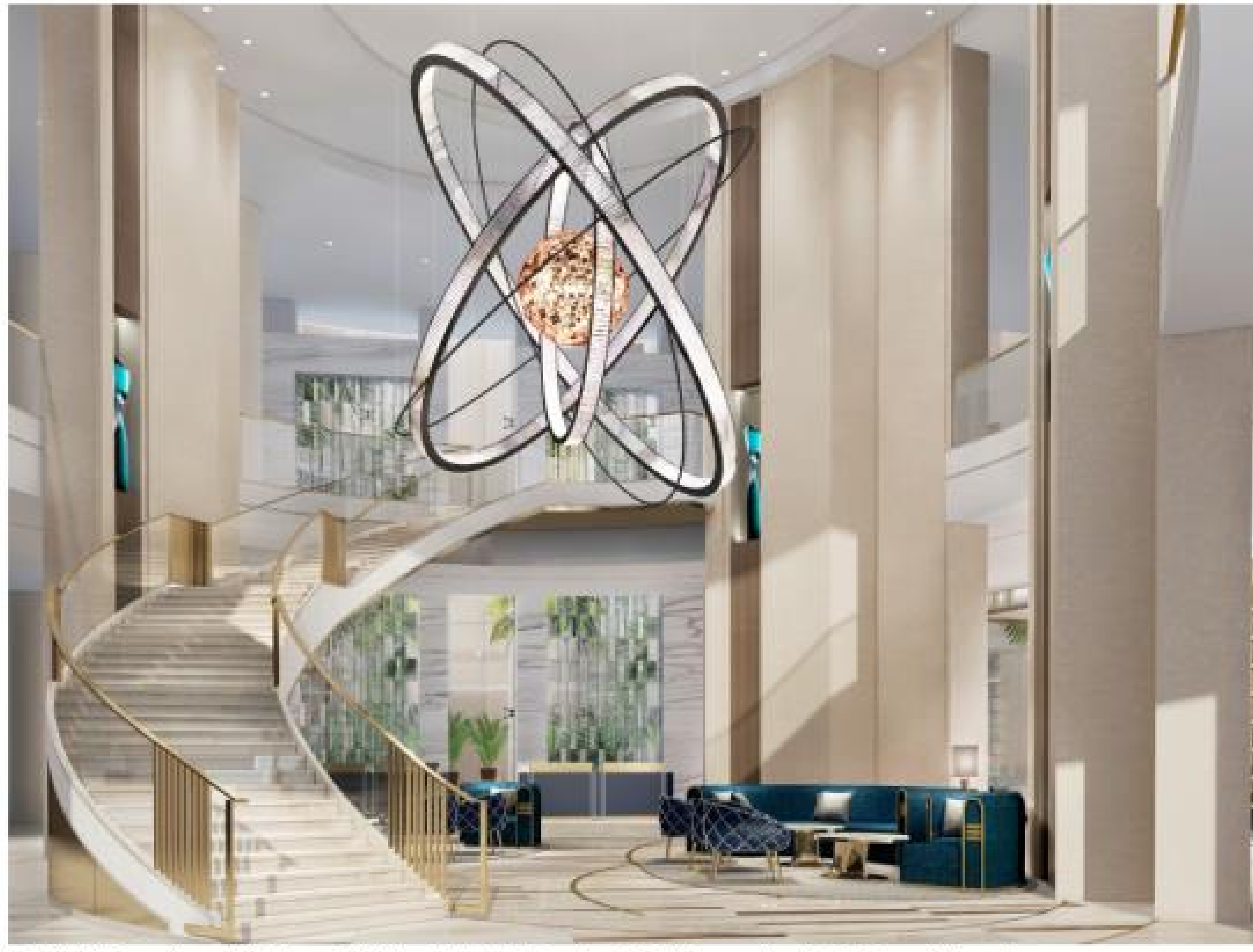
Hyatt Regency Jeddah Serafi Mall, slated to open in fall 2021, is located in Jeddah's Al-Aziziyah neighborhood. The 19-story hotel will be well-equipped with more than 500 guest rooms and residences, a lobby lounge, two dining options, and a ballroom.

Hyatt Place and Hyatt House

Hyatt Place and Hyatt House hotels in Riyadh are slated to open in fall 2022.

Hyatt Centric

Jabal Omar Hyatt Centric Makkah Hotel and Residences will feature 196 guest rooms and suites, while the residences will include 200 branded units that will be available to the public.



Hyatt Hotels Corporation said that five new Hyatt branded hotels will open by 2023, adding approximately 1,300 rooms to the region.

FASTFACT

Hyatt's current portfolio in Saudi Arabia consists of Park Hyatt Jeddah, Jabal Omar Hyatt Regency Makkah, Hyatt Regency Riyadh Olaya, Hyatt Place Riyadh Al-Sulaimania and Hyatt House Jeddah Sari Street.

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Landmark Arabia, EFE to train Saudi women in retail

Retail and hospitality group Landmark Arabia has signed a partnership agreement with Education for Employment (EFE) — Global, an organization linking unemployed youth to skills and job opportunities across the Middle East and North Africa.

As part of the agreement, the retail conglomerate will fund a bespoke program that provides training and placement to 50 women aged 18 to 25 from less privileged backgrounds.

Despite Saudi women accounting for 58 percent of university students, they comprise only 16 percent of the workforce. One of the main reasons for this is the disconnect between skills needed and the requirements of current and future jobs. The Landmark-EFE program seeks to address this issue by providing demand-driven job training.

Nisha Jagtiani, group director, Landmark Group, said: "Enabling Saudi women to become more economically independent by participating in the labor market has always been a priority for our group. At Landmark Arabia, more than 66 percent of our Saudi national workforce are women who are taking on prominent retail positions in our company."

"In alignment with the Saudi Vision 2030, we are committed to employing and training Saudi women in the retail sector," Jagtiani added. "Our partnership with EFE is a step closer toward implementing our plans in this direction, he said."



Nearly 50,000 women have graduated from EFE programs across the MENA region.

Dima Najim, managing director of EFE-UAE, said: "Nearly 50,000 young women have graduated from EFE programs across the MENA region. Through this partnership with Landmark Group, EFE will be able to raise awareness among young women in Saudi Arabia and across region about the potential of jobs in the retail sector."

Amr Abdallah, Gulf programs director of EFE, said: "More than 53 percent of our Saudi program graduates since we started in Saudi are women and we are pleased to support the Saudization efforts through the provision of our different programs."

HUMAN RESOURCES

First National Company inks deal with Sadara

The First National Company (FNRCO) has signed an agreement with petrochemical giant Sadara Chemical Company, enabling Sadara to utilize the services of FNRCO in the fields of human resources and solutions. The contract was recently signed by representatives of both the parties.

Ali Jaber Al-Mahan, chairman of the board of directors of FNRCO, said the company is proud of its partnerships with major local and international corporations. He said he is looking forward to similar agreements so as to participate in the country's development and the achievement of the goals of the Kingdom's Vision 2030.





The FNRCO has considerable experience in providing business and project development services in the Kingdom.

The company is registered and licensed by the Saudi Ministry of Labor and provides training for all professional and administrative specialties under the authorization of the General Organization for Technical Education and Vocational Training. The training covers maintenance and inspection services for electrical, mechanical and electronic works for industrial, petroleum and petrochemical companies.

Corporate Briefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

Tournament

Saudi body for electronic sports launches eMBS Cup

Saudi Arabian Federation for Electronic and Intellectual Sports (SAFEIS) has announced the launch of the eMBS Cup — a knockout tournament, which will take place on May 14 and 15th with only the top eight teams from the Electronic Saudi Professional League (eSPL) qualifying for it.

There are 16 teams participating in the eSPL. Each team represents one of the Saudi clubs in the Saudi Professional League (SPL). According to a statement by SAFEIS, Al-Ittihad club is at the top of the table with 62 point with Al-Ittifaq and Al-Nasser in second and third places, respectively. Al-Hilal club sits midtable with 34 points and Al-Faisaly falls at the bottom with 8 points. The final round of the eSPL set to take place on May 9 will decide who the eight teams participating in the eMBS Cup will be.

FIFA eWorld Cup champion Mosaad Al-Dossary said: "I am very excited to participate in such a tournament. It's different from the league where stamina is what is important. In the eMBS Cup, every game is like a final. There is no chance to recover. At the start of the league, I had a rocky start, now my team is at the top of the table. In a knockout championship, there is no room for recovery."

Food

Australian meat valued by Middle East consumers

Australian red meat is in demand in the Middle East and other major international markets, according to an Australian government report.

"Australian red meat is now not only accepted but demanded by ... housewives, supermarkets and hotels in every GCC country, to first and business class plates on the major airlines of that region. Demand will now spread through North Africa. Middle Eastern airlines are going to play a major role in opening up these markets to the Australian farmers," the report said.

Nick Meara, international business manager for Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA) — MENA, said: "The Middle East market is very important to us and we are committed to providing the region with the highest quality of Australian lamb and beef. The demand for a fresh product has increasingly been echoed by customers in the region and Australia is proud to be a leader in the delivery of meat that is fresh from farm to plate."

Mining

Mansourah & Massarah project awarded to Outotec

Ma'aden Gold and Base Metals Company, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Saudi Arabian Mining Company (Ma'aden), has awarded the engineering, procurement, construction, pre-commissioning and commissioning contract of the Mansourah & Massarah project to the consortium of Outotec and Larsen & Toubro.

The project also includes training services to develop national cadres in project engineering, operations and maintenance. The Mansourah & Massarah mines, processing plant and associated infrastructure will be located in the Central Arabian gold region, one of the richest geological areas in the Kingdom and are due to be completed in 2022.

This season, Phil Salt has made an unbeaten 137 off just 106 balls for Sussex against Kent in the 50-over cricket One-Day Cup.

FOOTBALL

Celtic win eighth straight Scottish Premiership title

AFP London

Celtic secured an eighth successive Scottish Premiership title with a 3-0 win away to Aberdeen on Saturday.

The Hoops, who only needed only to avoid defeat at Pittodrie to be sure of retaining their crown, saw Aberdeen's James Wilson twice hit the woodwork when the match was still scoreless.

But Celtic took the lead five minutes before half time when Mikael Lustig headed in a cross from Callum McGregor.

Jozo Simunovic, the match-winner against Kilmarnock last week, made it 2-0 with a 53rd-minute header from McGregor's corner.

French striker Odsonne Edouard, played in by Tom Rogic, completed the scoring two minutes from time with his 21st goal of the season.

Victory gave Celtic an unassailable 12-point lead over second-placed Rangers, their arch Glasgow rivals.

And with the Scottish League Cup already won, Celtic — still unbeaten under interim manager Neil Lennon — are now two-thirds of the way to completing an unprecedented third consecutive domestic treble.

Also on Saturday, nine-man Tottenham Hotspur's bid for English Champions League football was rocked after Nathan Ake's last-gasp winner punished red cards for Son Heung-min and Juan Foyth and condemned Spurs to a 1-0 defeat at Bournemouth.

South Korea forward Son was sent off for a needless push in the closing moments of the first half and Argentine defender Foyth saw red for a studs-up lunge soon after the interval, barely two minutes after entering the field as a half-time substitute.

Mauricio Pochettino's side looked like they would hold on for a point as the match entered stoppage time, but Bournemouth defender Ake ended third-placed Tottenham's stubborn resistence to delay their attempt to guarantee a place in the Premier League's top four.

A win at Dean Court would have achieved that aim, but fourth-placed Chelsea will now go above Spurs if they defeat Watford and Arsenal, currently fifth, will move to within one point of their north London rivals if they beat Brighton.

Tottenham's ninth defeat in their last 15 games in all competitions means they need to wait for Sunday's results to see if they need to win their final Premier League game of the season at home to Everton on May 12.

It was the worst possible preparation for their bid to overturn a 1-0 deficit in the Champions League semifinal second leg at Ajax on Wednesday.

Pochettino did not rest any of his key players ahead of the trip to Amsterdam, with Son, Dele Alli, Christian Eriksen, Moussa Sissoko and Lucas Moura all starting, although Jan Vertonghen was absent after his head injury in midweek.

Lucas Moura tried to catch out Bournemouth's teenage keeper Mark Travers with an audacious effort from the halfway line.

Travers, making his Premier League debut, was way off his line, but went unpunished as the Tottenham forward's shot went just wide.

The 19-year-old was fortunate on that occasion, but he proved he had banished any nerves when he dived to his right to save Dele Alli's long-range strike.

Lucas tried again from more conventional range when the Brazilian burst clear for a shot from the edge of the area that Travers did well to tip over the bar.

Shining in his personal duel with Lucas, Travers foiled the Tottenham star for a third time, quickly rushing off his line to save with his legs.

At 19 years and 351 days, Travers, who has already received a Republic of Ireland call-up, was the first teenage goalkeeper to start a Premier League game since Joe Hart in October 2006.

Travers' last game of senior club football was during his loan spell with non-league Weymouth at Gosport Borough on New Year's Day 2018 in front of a crowd of just 418.


Celtic's Odsonne Edouard scores a goal against Aberdeen in London. Reuters

HIGHLIGHTS

- Victory gives Celtic unassailable 12-point lead over arch-rivals Rangers.
- The club — still unbeaten under interim manager Neil Lennon — are now two-thirds of the way to completing an unprecedented third consecutive domestic treble.
- Also on Saturday, nine-man Tottenham Hotspur faced defeat by Bournemouth in a crucial English Premier League match.

TENNIS

Teichmann outlasts Muchova in Prague to win first title

Swiss star fights for 2:44 hours to overcome the 106th-ranked Czech

AFP, Reuters Prague

Jil Teichmann, ranked 146th in the world, won her first WTA title on Saturday when she beat Karolina Muchova 7-6 (7/5), 3-6, 6-4 in the Prague Open final.

In a battle of qualifiers, the 21-year-old Swiss had to fight for two hours and 44 minutes to overcome the 22-year-old Czech, who is ranked 106th.

"I'm just speechless, honestly," Teichmann said after the match. "I just fought and fought. It was a great battle and I'm just relieved that it's done."

Muchova saved six set points before Teichmann finally took the first. In the third set, the Swiss was twice a break down before finally prevailing.

"I'm exhausted, but Kaja played a great match as well. I knew it was going to be a battle, but in the end, one has to win," Teichmann added.

Teichmann is the 20th different WTA champion in 21 events so far this season, according to the WTA.

She will be in the top 100 for the first time on Monday.

On Friday, Teichmann's breakthrough week on the Tour stunned world No. 39 Barbora Strycova 6-3 6-0 in their semi-final.



I'm just speechless. I just fought and fought. It was a great battle and I'm just relieved that it's done.
Jil Teichmann Swiss tennis star

Teichmann fired 22 winners in the contest, doubling Strycova's tally of 11, and finished with just 14 unforced errors to seal the victory in just over an hour.

Making just her seventh WTA main draw appearance, Muchova was clinical in the opening set, executing four spectacular dropshot winners.

Separately, Chile's Cristian Garin sprung a second surprise in two days at the Munich Open on Saturday, beating third seed Marco Cecchinato 6-2, 6-4 to reach the final of the clay court ATP tournament.

Garin, ranked 47 in the world, beat world No. 3 and two-time Munich champion Alexander Zverev in the quarter-finals on Friday before continuing his fine form against Cecchinato in a semifinal which was repeatedly interrupted by rain.

Ranked outside the top 200 just a year ago, Garin won his first ATP Tour title in Houston last month.

The 22-year-old Chilean will face Spain's Roberto Bautista Agut or Italy's Matteo Berrettini in Sunday's final.

Jil Teichmann poses with her trophy after winning over Karolina Muchova in their final match at the WTA Prague Tennis Open in Prague on Saturday. Teichmann is the 20th different WTA champion in 21 events this season. AFP

CRICKET

Salt replaces injured Malan in England squad for Pakistan T20

AFP London

Uncapped Sussex batsman Phil Salt has been added to England's squad for Sunday's Twenty20 international against Pakistan following Dawid Malan's withdrawal through injury.

Middlesex's Malan suffered a groin problem while batting during England's unconvincing four-wicket win away to Ireland in a lone one-day international on Friday and will now miss the one-off T20 in Cardiff.

Welsh-born Salt, 22, has made just the four fifties in 35 T20 matches but a strike-rate of 151.50 has put him on the radar of England's selectors.

This season Salt has made an unbeaten 137 off just 106 balls for Sussex against Kent in the 50-over One-Day Cup.

Salt, who spent part of his childhood in Barbados, has also played for Islamabad United in the Pakistan Super League.

Salt joins a growing list of players outside England's provisional squad for the 50-over World Cup to be called up in the early stages of the international season. Just seven those who travel to Cardiff's Sophia Gardens were named in last month's preliminary 15 by the tournament hosts.

Several others have been rested, rotated, or, in the case of Alex Hales, dropped.

The Nottinghamshire batsman reportedly failed a second test for recreational drug use.



Sport Briefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

Speed

Petrucci fastest again in Jerez practice

Danilo Petrucci was again the quickest in Jerez on Saturday as he recorded the fastest time in a lightning display in the third free practice ahead of the Spanish MotoGP. The Ducati rider became the first man to ever lap the recently resurfaced Jerez track in under 1 minute 37 seconds. He finished with the best average time over the three sessions ahead of Spanish world champion Marc Marquez on a Honda and Frenchman Fabio Quartararo on a Yamaha.

Less than half a second covered the 12 fastest average times. Fellow Italian and multiple world champion Valentino Rossi just failed to drag himself into the top 10 and earn a direct pass to the second qualifying session. AFP



Controversy

Afridi casts doubt on age record in autobiography

Pakistan's Shahid Afridi smashed a 37-ball century against Sri Lanka in 1996, he not only registered the fastest-ever one-day ton, he also became the youngest player to score 100 runs in an international.

Or did he?

In a new autobiography, the fiery all-rounder says he was aged 19 when he blasted onto the world stage with his record-breaking innings, and not 16 as history suggests.

"For the record, I was just nineteen, and not 16 like they claim," he writes in "Game Changer," which went on sale this week.

"I was born in 1975. So, yes, the authorities stated my age incorrectly." AFP

Spreading music

Ronaldinho raps against embezzlement

Brazil's Ronaldinho has found a second calling after retiring from professional football: Rapper.

The former Brazil national and FC Barcelona megastar — full name Ronaldinho Gaucho — has released a song along with Brazilian singer Jorge Vercillo decrying corruption in their country.

The 2005 Golden Ball award winner appears in a video, recorded in a studio, wearing a black beret and a white tank top emblazoned with the image of St. George slaying a dragon.

Halfway through the duet, he plays drums, then breaks out in a 30-second rap solo. AFP


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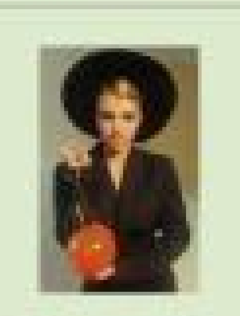


Models hit the runway on Friday to show off Chanel's 2020 Cruise collection in Paris, where designer Virginie Viard made an elegant debut in her first complete collection for the fashion house.



Popular purses

These Middle East-based handbag labels have a legion of celebrity fans.



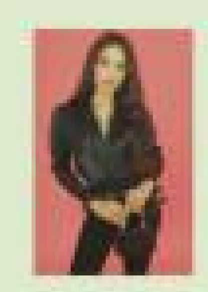
Marzook

Founded by Kuwaiti siblings Fahad and Shouq Al-Marzouk in 2014, the duo recently joined forces with US socialite Sofia Richie on a capsule collection.



Okhtein

Egyptian sisters Aya and Mounaz Abdul Raouf founded the highly successful accessories label in 2014 and it is now much loved by a host of A-listers, including Gigi Hadid, Beyonce, Queen Rania and Winnie Harlow, among others.



Les Miniatures

Egyptian accessories designers Farah Yasser and Hanna Hazem dreamt about launching their own collection of handbags since they were children, but it was not until 2011 that it crystallized. The result: Les Miniatures — a collection of pint-sized micro-bags favored by the likes of Josephine Skriver, Shanina Shaik and Jasmine Tookes.



Sarah's Bag

Sarah Beydoun's Lebanese accessories label Sarah's Bag features a range of quirky and covetable clutches championed by everyone from Beyonce to Nadine Labaki.



L'Afshar

The Dubai-based accessories brand's signature box clutches have been worn by the likes of Kylie Jenner, Gabrielle Union, Olivia Culpo and Rosie Huntington-Whitely.



Azra

Designed by Azra Khamissa, these UAE-made minimalist leather bags have been spotted on the likes of Lebanese fashion influencer Maya Ahmad, among others.

CLOSE UP

Nathalie Fanj explores Saudi Arabia's Al-Ula

Arab News Dubai

Lebanese influencer Nathalie Fanj explored the stunning scenery of Saudi Arabia's Al-Ula over the weekend and documented her trip on Instagram.

Fanj was wowed by the ruins of Madain Saleh, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that features well-preserved, rock-cut tombs and monuments dating back to the Nabatean period.

The influencer took her 480,000 Instagram followers on a tour of the area, posting videos and photos from her weekend away.

"Super happy to be in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia's hidden gem! I spent all day exploring and discovering this historical landmark and I can't wait to share with you what I've been up to," she captioned a photograph on Instagram.

"So, this is where I spent the past few days. I can't express how beautiful and emotional this trip was, it felt so good being away from working on my phone and resting my eyes on such breathtaking scenery, an endless prospect of wonder. This is where you appreciate mother Earth the most, when you see the work on a big scale spread before you," she added in another video post.

In the video, Fanj can be seen running across the sand dunes barefoot, before the camera pans up to show one of the rock-cut monuments in all its glory.

In the clip, Fanj wears a summer-ready dress by Piaff Boutique.

The purpose of Fanj's trip to Saudi Arabia's desert was not immediately clear, but the fashion blogger promised to share more with her fans in the coming days.

"Time to go home! I'll be sharing more about this trip and preparing for another big one next week," she captioned a photo in which she can be seen standing in front of a Saudia jet.

Fanj seems to be ahead of the curve in promoting the area as a destination worth exploring on social media after the Winter at Tantora festival, held earlier this year, was widely seen as a major step in the promotion of Al-Ula as a tourist hotspot.

Right: Lebanese influencer Nathalie Fanj has a stellar 480,000 followers on Instagram. Getty Images



Below: The influencer explored Al-Ula over the weekend and shared a variety of photos on social media. Instagram



Rapper Pitbull stars in the film. AFP

'UGLYDOLLS'

Pitbull takes on bullying and self-acceptance

AFP Los Angeles

An animated film about misfit toys seems an unlikely fit for a smooth reggaeton rapper, but Pitbull is front and center in "UglyDolls" and he loves the message it sends.

The film, which opens Friday in North America, tells the story of toys who have been discarded for not being "perfect" — and the resolve of one doll, Moxy (singer Kelly Clarkson), to be loved by a child someday.

"Perfection doesn't exist and what I want for young people, for kids, is for them to appreciate what it is to be different, that it's something good," Pitbull, who plays UglyDog in the film, told AFP in an interview.

Pitbull — real name, Armando Christian Perez — is joined in the cast by a host of other musicians, including country star Blake Shelton, pop futurist Janelle Monae and singers Bebe Rexha and Charli XCX.



Meet the director behind Netflix hit 'Knock Down the House'

Rua'a Alameri Dubai

American documentary "Knock Down the House" created a buzz in the film industry when it had its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January.

The film, about four female US primary candidates, has an approval rating of 100 percent on review site Rotten Tomatoes.

Director Rachel Lears said the response to the film had made her hope it will encourage political participation.

"I do hope it can be a tool for people who are organizing for change in our government and in our democratic process, but also hope it can encourage people to engage with the political process who might not otherwise feel left out," Lears told Arab News.

Lears said she was inspired to make the documentary after the 2016 US presidential elections.

"After the 2016 election, a lot of ordinary people wanted to get involved in politics," she said, explaining that there was a "wave" of women, people of color, as well as political outsiders and first-time candidates who stood to compete in the 2018 midterm elections.

Lears believes this was influenced by the Trump administration's policies, which left some communities feeling underrepresented. "I was really interested in highlighting the work of people who were working really hard to connect the struggles of different communities around the country."

Aside from successful campaigner Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Lears' documentary followed Amy Vilela, Cori Bush and Paula Jean Swearengin. The candidates came from different backgrounds but represented the same ideals — they refused corporate donations and aimed to represent the average working-class person.

Lears said she wanted to focus on those who had "grass-roots" campaigns. "I was looking for people who would be really interesting to watch no matter what happens with their elections. Of course, there was a very real possibility that all four of them might have lost."

Ocasio-Cortez was the first candidate Lears met, in March 2017. Ocasio-Cortez won the Democratic Party's primary election for New York on June 26, 2018, defeating Joe Crowley in what was widely seen as the biggest victory in the 2018 US mid-term elections.

